

Alaskan

Seniors

Living Longer Growing Stronger

from the Alaska Commission on Aging

May 2000

May is Older Alaskans Month!

The mission of the Alaska Commission on Aging is to ensure dignity and independence for Alaska's seniors and to assist them, through programs and services funded by the Commission, to lead useful and meaningful lives.



**Alaskan Seniors:
Living Longer,
Growing Stronger**
is a monthly
publication of the
Alaska Commission
on Aging (ACoA)

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“Home, Safe Home?”

Safety and Accessibility are Key to Living at Home As We Age

According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, almost four of five older Americans own their own home. Older Americans are among the best housed citizens of a well-housed nation. However, many older Americans continue to live in housing that fails to accommodate their physical capabilities or assistance needs. Safe homes are vital to independent living as we age. This is especially important in Alaska, where we are committed to helping seniors stay in their own homes and communities whenever possible.

Many seniors purchased their homes before architects and builders began incorporating accommodations for those with limited mobility. Often we don't even notice inconveniences or dangers in our own homes. As problems arise, we are more likely to change or limit our behavior rather than modify our homes to make them more accessible.

We all benefit from a periodic examination of our homes for possible hazards. This is especially important as we age. This issue of *Alaskan Seniors: Living Longer, Growing Stronger* looks at home modification, universal design, and other issues related to creating a safer home.

Falling in the Home is a Serious Threat As We Age

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reports that in 1996, more than 8,500 people over the age of 65 died because of falls! According to AARP and the Coalition for Consumer Health and Safety, falls are the sixth leading cause of death among people over 65. Many more falls are not fatal, but seriously injure seniors. As we age bones may break more easily and heal more slowly, often with complications. For many who survive falls, the resulting injury necessitates moving to an out-of-home care center. Tragically, many falls are caused by conditions in the home that are so common as to be overlooked. Most of these conditions are easy and inexpensive to correct. Let's all carefully examine our homes to eliminate or alter conditions that might lead to falls. This will lessen the likelihood of accidents.

Many senior advocacy agencies publish checklists for fall prevention that detail modifications that can make your home safer. All of them stress some basic approaches to reduce the risk of falling:

- Maintain your health! Proper nutrition and regular exercise improve balance and coordination, and strengthen your body to help withstand injury should a fall occur.
- Have your doctor or pharmacist review the full list of medications you take. If a medication seems to make you sleepy or dizzy, they may recommend changing the prescription or dosage.
- Have your vision and hearing checked at least once a year.
- Wear sturdy shoes with thin, nonslip soles. Avoid slippers and running shoes with thick soles.
- Modify your home to reduce chances of falling. Make sure hall and stairways are properly lit and free of obstructions.
- Put your phone on a low stand so you can reach it from the floor in case you fall.

Falling Facts

- **Nearly 30% of all Americans 65 and over fall in the home each year.***
- **Falls are the leading cause of injury among older Americans.†**
- **60% of falls occur in the home.†**
- **10% of falls result in injuries such as head trauma, hematomas, joint dislocations, and muscle sprains.†**
- **5% of falls result in fractures, mostly of the hip.†**
- **Hip fractures cost Americans \$12 – 17 billion each year.†**
- **Of those seniors hospitalized for falls, only 1/2 will be alive one year later.†**
- **An estimated 90% of falls in the home are preventable.***

**The Medical Tribune*

†*Gerinotes*, September 1996

For additional data on falls, see page 4.

Commission Meeting Set for June

The Alaska Commission on Aging will meet June 13 – 15 at Land's End, 4786 Homer Spit Road, Homer. Business to be addressed includes renewal of Commission grants and review of a draft work plan for the next year. Public comment on Commission activities and other senior advocacy issues is invited. Public comment periods will be 4:30 PM Tuesday, June 13, 1:30 PM Wednesday, June 14, and 9:30 AM on Thursday, June 15. For more information, please contact Gretchen Barnes, (907) 465-3250.

Universal Design Begins with Access

Universal design, a common sense approach to creating accessible living, is becoming a hot trend in home building. Sometimes called “life-span design,” universal design takes into account everyone who may use the home. This includes seniors, children, and those with special physical needs. This provides for the comfort and safety of all. It is easy and relatively inexpensive to design homes for access that would be costly or difficult to add later. Owners of universal design homes are more likely to be able to live at home in their later years, even if mobility decreases.

Universal design identifies five basic features that should be included in a home:

1. *At least one no-step entrance.* Careful grading and landscaping can replace steps or a ramp.
2. *Eating, bathing, and sleeping spaces at an accessible level.* Not all parts of a house need to be accessible if these key areas are accessible to all.
3. *Wide doorways on the accessible level.* Thirty-two inches is the recommended minimum width, 36 inches is preferred.
4. *Wide halls and pathways through rooms on the accessible level.* Thirty-six inches is the recommended minimum, 42 inches is preferred.
5. *Extra floor space for the use of wheelchairs.* A 60-inch turning circle is needed in accessible activity areas.

Additional features of universal design include lever door handles rather than knobs, rocker light switches, and front-mounted bath spigots and oven controls that require less leaning over or reaching to operate.

If you’re building or buying a new home, request universal design features. When you purchase new appliances, such as washers or dryers, ask about universal design features.

Contact the agencies below for more information on independent living resources in Alaska

The AARP Alaska Information Center

3101 Penland Parkway, Room K36
Anchorage Alaska 99508
888-805-1540, or (907) 272-1444
FAX (907) 272-1114

Kenai Peninsula Independent Living Center

P.O. Box 2474
Homer, AK 99603
(907) 235-7911 or toll free 800-770-7911
Soldotna Office: (907) 262-6333
Seward Office: (907) 224-8711

Access Alaska Fairbanks

3550 Airport Way, Suite 3
Fairbanks, AK 99709-4772
(907) 479-7940 or toll free 800-770-7940

Southeast Alaska Independent Living (SAIL)

P.O. Box 35097
2490 Industrial Blvd.
Juneau, AK 99801-5097
(907) 789-9665 or toll free 800-478-7245
Sitka Office: (907) 747-6859
Ketchikan Office: (907) 225-4735

Access Alaska Anchorage

3710 Woodland Drive, Suite 900
Anchorage, AK 99517-2571
(907) 248-4777 or toll free 800-770-4488

Arctic Access

P.O. Box 930
Kotzebue, AK 99752
(907) 442-2393

