

**OBJECTIVES:**

Review the importance of environmental safety

Review environmental factors to consider

Review ways to help ensure a safe home environment

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**References:**

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**HOME ENVIRONMENT**

As the U.S. population continues aging, older adults and their family caregivers are more often seeking ways to stay in their own homes and communities for as long as possible. In-home aides can observe a client's home environment while providing care in the home. This is a vital role for an in-home aide to help ensure a safe home environment for the client and the aide themselves. Each person's home environment will have unique needs according to the person's functional status and abilities. A person's home environment affects safety and quality of life. Items to consider for determining a safe home environment include looking at the home for:

- Pests such as mice, rats, bugs, roaches, bed bugs, other types of pests.
- Home structural issues with flooring, walls, steps, other.
- Lack of resources such as water, cooking facilities.
- Inadequate or no air conditioning which can lead to dehydration or heat stroke or inadequate or no heat which can lead to a dangerously low body temperature. These needed resources will be dependent upon the weather in the client's area. People living with asthma, COPD, or other chronic conditions may be more susceptible to effects of not having air conditioning.
- If electricity is needed for medical devices such as oxygen concentrators or other life sustaining devices, is the utility company aware of the client's need for electricity as a priority during any outages and are there backup systems in place during power outages.
- Falls can be related to environmental hazards such as loose rugs, steps or stairs with no railings, loose carpet, slick and or wet floors, furniture blocking walkways. Adjusting the furniture layout to create clear and accessible pathways, especially if assistive equipment is needed, for ambulation may be needed. The client and family would need to be involved in determining furniture placement. Notify your supervisor if the client's environment poses a trip hazard.

Report any of the following to your supervisor: rodents, maggots, snakes, fleas, or roaches. These all create an unsanitary environment for both the client and the employee. The agency supervisor should work with the client and family to ensure that the home is sanitary enough for care to be provided.

Unsafe structural problems may also be a safety factor for client and the In-home aide. Report the following and other structural safety issues you observe to your supervisor as these conditions create an unsafe working environment for you and your client:

- Floors that move downward when you walk on them.
- Holes in the floor. Rotten boards or flooring.
- Bathrooms that do not function properly, lack of water.
- Frayed electrical wiring that is exposed.
- Cracked or damaged electrical cords.
- Cords along the floor that can cause a tripping hazard.

## **HOME ENVIRONMENT**

### **Safety and Environmental conditions can include:**

- Functioning utilities- indoor plumbing, hot water, heating and cooling system, essential kitchen facilities (cooking appliances), laundry facilities, smoke detectors, fire extinguisher. Have smoke and carbon monoxide alarms been installed near the kitchen and in all bedrooms? Have the batteries been checked recently?
- Home structure condition- ceilings, walls, floors, windows, doors, stairs and steps including railings. Are there challenges with rooms in the house that are used the most? Are there tripping hazards in the entrance to the home and in the home? Are there non-slip strips or mats on tile and wood floors or surfaces that may get wet? Are carpets fixed firmly to the floor? Are all walking areas free of furniture and extension and electrical cords? Are outdoor steps sturdy and textured to prevent falls in wet or icy weather? Marking the edges of steps with bright or reflective tape may be helpful. Are there any uneven surfaces or walkways, hoses, and other objects that may cause a person to trip? Are there grab bars near toilets and in the tub or shower? Are nonskid adhesive strips, decals, or mats in the tub and shower? If the bathroom is uncarpeted, the client/family may want to consider placing these strips next to the tub, toilet, and sink as well.

Observe the home environment for hazards that could cause injury to clients. Be aware of fall safety hazards. Report tripping or slipping hazards you notice to your supervisor. (ex. in the bathroom, kitchen, bedroom, other). Clutter is a safety hazard and is a major cause of accidental falls in the home. For example, a magazine on the floor is very slippery. You can help keep your clients safe by keeping the environment as free from clutter as possible. If you cannot discard it, try to arrange the clutter as neatly as possible and move it out of the way. If appropriate, educate the client and family about the safety hazards you have noted. Report clutter that appears to hamper safety to your supervisor.

Oxygen safety- Oxygen is a safe gas and is non-flammable; however, it supports combustion. Report to your supervisor if your client smokes and wears oxygen, or if others in the home or anyone visiting smokes. This is a fire hazard.

Bathroom safety- Has a shower stool and a hand-held shower head been installed to make bathing easier? Is the water heater set at 120° F to avoid scalding tap water? Is there a night light to make overnight trips to the bathroom safer? Are there grab bars on shower walls or near the toilet to aid with stabilization. Towel racks are not the same as grab bars and can pull out from the wall. The client or family may want to swap doorknobs and faucets for lever-style handles, which are easier to use for those with stiff hands or limited mobility.

Are there secure locks on all outside doors and windows? If a walker or wheelchair is needed, can the client or family have entrances to the house modified — perhaps by putting in a ramp to the front door? Is there a small bench or table by the entry door to hold bags and packages while unlocking the door? Is outside lighting adequate? Light sensors that turn on lights automatically as a person approaches the house may be useful.

Chemical hazards- Read the labels on your client's cleaning supplies and equipment. If you are not familiar with them, familiarize yourself with their uses and hazards or contraindications prior to use. Cleaning supplies are chemicals and should be treated as such. Proper usage and storage are important for your client's health, as well as your own. Some reminders include:

- Never use a product that does not have a label.
- Never mix any cleaning products. Chemical reactions may occur and can produce serious hazards and fumes. For example, never mix bleach products with ammonia products. The fumes are very toxic and can be life threatening. Also noteworthy is the fact that urine has ammonia in it. Never pour bleach on a urine spill, human or pet. Since urine has ammonia in it, the mix of bleach and ammonia may produce toxic fumes.

## **HOME ENVIRONMENT**

Safety is important for everyone, but the need for a comprehensive safety plan is particularly important for a person living with Alzheimer's as the disease progresses. Alzheimer's disease causes a number of changes in the brain and body that may affect safety. Dementia sometimes causes changes in vision that make it difficult for a person to decipher between colors and understand what he or she sees. A person living with dementia may be more prone to safety hazards in certain areas of the home or outdoors. It is important to make sure the homes of people who have dementia are safe for them.

### **Safety Tips for the Home:**

- Follow the plan of care for each of your clients and notify your supervisor of safety issues you notice. Inspect the person's home and remove or reduce hazards for tripping and falling with permission from the client or responsible party if applicable.
- Do not leave a person who has advanced dementia alone at home.
- Remove or lock up cleaning products and other items that may be poisonous.
- Make sure the kitchen is safe. The family could remove knobs on the stove when it is not in use. Turn pot and pan handles inside when cooking.
- Lock up sharp objects.
- The family could also do the following to help with a safe environment by removing, or storing the following in locked areas:
  - ✓ All medicines, including the person's medicines and any over-the-counter medicines and supplements.
  - ✓ All alcohol and illegal drugs.
  - ✓ All weapons and guns. Separate ammunition from the guns.
  - ✓ Monitor garages, work rooms, basements and outside areas, where there are more likely to be tools, chemicals, cleaning supplies and other potentially hazardous items.
  - ✓ Discard toxic plants and decorative fruits that may be mistaken for real food. Remove vitamins, prescription drugs, sugar substitutes and seasonings from the kitchen table and counters.

Wandering can be a serious problem for people who have more advanced dementia. These tips that the supervisor can discuss with the client's family/responsible person may help prevent wandering. These are items the family would need to do in the client's home.

- Place alarms on all doors and windows that will sound if the doors are opened.
- Place a Stop sign on doors to the outside.
- Keep car keys out of sight.

Tips to prevent harm when someone with dementia does wander, ideas for the family include:

- Have the person wear an ID bracelet or necklace with their name, address, and phone number on it. Include a caretaker's contact information, if possible.
- Tell neighbors and others in the area that the person who has dementia may wander. Ask them to call you or to help them get home if this happens.
- Fence and close off any areas that may be dangerous, such as a stairwell, a deck, a hot tub, or a swimming pool.
- Consider giving the person a GPS device or a cell phone with a GPS locator embedded in it.

**Your agency can learn about community resources to assist your clients with environmental safety needs. Your local Area Agency on Aging, local and state offices on aging or social services, or your tribal organization may have lists of services. These organizations will be familiar with resources available in your community and may have tips for accessing them. Health care providers and social workers may also have suggestions. If a person belongs to a religious community, it may offer services for older adults. Other types of charitable organizations may have helpful resources.**