

Home safety checker

Staying safe around the home



Information and advice you need to help you love later life.

We're Age UK and our goal is to enable older people to love later life.

We are passionate about affirming that your later years can be fulfilling years. Whether you're enjoying your later life or going through tough times, we're here to help you make the best of your life.

Our network includes Age Cymru, Age NI, Age Scotland, Age International and more than 160 local partners.

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Date of publication: May 2017. © Age UK 2017
Next review date: May 2019

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What this guide is about

It's important that we feel safe in our homes, yet more accidents happen at home than anywhere else. This guide looks at ways to help you identify and resolve any possible safety risks, and help prevent accidents. Although some of these points may seem obvious, they can often be overlooked – so it's worth checking them.

As far as possible, the information given in this guide is applicable across the UK.

Key



This symbol indicates where information differs for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.



This symbol indicates who to contact for the next steps you need to take..

Fire prevention

Fires can start quickly and cause a lot of damage but there are some simple things you can do in your home to prevent them.

Get a smoke alarm and check that it works

It's vital to have at least one smoke alarm on every floor of your home. Alarms should bear the British Standard number BS 5446 and the Kitemark. Test them monthly and keep them free from dust. Use a step ladder or get someone to help you when fitting, testing or cleaning your alarms, as standing on a chair is less stable and could cause you to fall.

Change the battery at least once a year or get a long-life alarm that can last between seven and ten years without needing a new battery.

There are specialist smoke alarms if you have hearing or vision difficulties.

Private landlords in England are required to fit smoke alarms on every floor of their property. If you live in private rented accommodation check with your landlord to ensure that this has been done. In Wales, any property built since 1992 must be fitted with mains-powered smoke alarms.



Plan a fire escape route

Preparing and planning an escape route can save valuable time in a fire. Make sure exits, corridors and stairs are free from clutter. If you live in a flat, follow the building's fire evacuation plan and avoid using lifts. If there's an alternative escape route, check how to use it.

Plan a Home Fire Risk Check

Some fire and rescue services offer a Home Fire Risk Check where they can visit to help you install smoke alarms, plan escape routes and assess other hazards.

Use a fire guard and sweep the chimney

Fire guards let you safely enjoy an open fire. It's important to keep your chimney and flues swept to prevent fire and the build-up of carbon monoxide which can lead to poisoning (see page 6 for more information about carbon monoxide). Have your chimney swept at least once a year, or more depending on the type of fuel you use. You can find an approved chimney sweep through HETAS (Heating Equipment Testing and Approval Scheme) (see page 28).

Take care when drying clothes

Drying clothes near a fire or electric heater can be a fire risk. Keep them away from direct sources of heat.

Be careful with candles, incense or oil burners

Don't leave them unattended and make sure they are put out completely when you have finished with them.

Stub it out

If you smoke, use deep ashtrays and stub out each cigarette properly. Never smoke in bed.

If you do have a fire

Don't panic. Remember the fire service advice:

Get out, stay out and call 999.

Don't be tempted under any circumstances to re-enter a room or building that is on fire.

what next?

Talk to your local fire and rescue service for more advice on fire safety or see if they can give your home a fire risk check. Visit the UK Fire Service website at www.fireservice.co.uk to find your local fire and rescue service (see page 29). In



Scotland, contact the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service for a free fire check and smoke alarm installation in your home (see page 29).



It's vital to have at least one smoke alarm on **every floor of your home**. Alarms should bear the British Standard number BS 5446 and the Kitemark.

Gas and solid fuel safety

Gas and solid fuel problems can go unnoticed but some straightforward checks on your appliances will make your home safer and reduce the risks of any accidents.

Be aware of carbon monoxide

Carbon monoxide is known as a ‘silent killer’ because you can’t see, taste or smell it. Low exposure to carbon monoxide can cause long-term health problems, while high exposure can cause poisoning. Heaters or appliances that burn gas, coal, oil or wood can give off carbon monoxide if they are not working properly.

Signs that appliances may be faulty include yellow or brown staining, a lazy yellow or orange-coloured gas flame rather than a sharp blue flame, or too much moisture in the room.

Symptoms of carbon-monoxide poisoning can be similar to a cold, flu or food-poisoning and can include headaches, feeling sick, a sore throat and a dry cough. If you’re worried that you might have carbon-monoxide poisoning, call 999 straight away.

Install an audible carbon monoxide alarm bearing the Kitemark and European Standard number BS EN 50291. Test it monthly.



If you live in private rented accommodation in England, your landlord must fit an alarm in each room containing a gas or solid fuel appliance. In Wales, a landlord must fit a carbon monoxide alarm if a new solid fuel burning appliance is installed. The Welsh Government’s Code of Practice for landlords recommends that carbon monoxide alarms should be provided in all rooms where a gas, oil or solid fuel appliance is present.

Allow air flow and ventilation

Make sure there's enough ventilation for gas or solid fuel appliances to burn. Keep air vents and chimneys clear and unblocked.

Organise a yearly gas appliances check

An annual check can ensure that your appliances are working safely. Unsafe gas appliances may not show any warning signs. Make sure that the check and any repairs are done by a Gas Safe registered engineer (see page 27). Never try to repair or service a gas appliance yourself, or let a friend or relative try.

If you own your home and are in receipt of a means-tested benefit such as Pension Credit, you may be entitled to a free annual gas safety check from your energy supplier. You should ask them about this and any other priority services you might be eligible for (see page 11). Make sure you shop around if you're not eligible for a free check, as costs can vary.

If you're a tenant, your landlord is legally required to arrange a safety check at least once a year for the gas appliances they have provided. The engineer must be registered with Gas Safe. The landlord must give you a copy of the inspection record within 28 days of the check and fix any problems reported by the engineer.

Service any solid fuel appliances

Solid-fuel appliances – for example, heaters or cookers that burn wood or coal – also need to be serviced regularly. For more information contact HETAS, the official organisation for approving solid-fuel appliances. They have a directory of registered installers and servicers that you can search online (see page 28).

Check the pilot light on your boiler

If you have a gas boiler with a pilot light, check regularly that the pilot light is burning. If it has gone out, there should be instructions on the boiler on how to relight it. If you can't do it yourself, call out a heating engineer. Make sure your engineer is Gas Safe registered.

If you smell gas or suspect a gas leak

Open all doors and windows, turn off the gas supply and call the 24-hour National Gas Emergency Service on 0800 111 999. Do not use a phone near the gas leak, as this could cause a spark that might ignite the gas. Use a mobile phone outside your property, or a neighbour's phone. Don't turn any electrical switches or appliances on or off.

**what
next?**

Contact the Gas Safe Register (see page 27) for more information on gas safety or to find a registered engineer.



Heaters or appliances that burn gas, coal, oil or wood **can give off carbon monoxide** if they are not working properly.

Electrical safety

Try some simple checks to avoid electrical safety problems.

Don't overload sockets

Overloaded sockets can be a fire hazard. If you don't have enough sockets, use a bar adapter on a lead rather than a block adapter. But for appliances that use a lot of power, such as a fridge or washing machine, put only one plug in each socket.

Check the condition of your electrics

Check your plugs, sockets, cables and appliances for any damage, such as fraying and exposed or loose wires. Damaged electrical appliances are a fire hazard. Don't ignore warning signs such as burning smells, buzzing or crackling sounds, or fuses blowing.

Keep appliances out of the bathroom

Appliances such as hairdryers, heaters (unless fitted with a cord pull) and mains-powered radios should never be used in the bathroom.

Test your electric blanket

Get your electric blanket tested by an expert at least every three years and replace it every 10 years. The shop where you bought the blanket or your local Trading Standards office may be able to test it (see page 29). Your local Age UK may also have a handyperson scheme that can help (see page 27). Check for danger signs, such as frayed fabric or scorch marks. Check whether you have the type of blanket that can be left on overnight – if not, always unplug it when you go to bed. Never switch it on if it's damp or wet, and never use it with a hot-water bottle.

Be careful with portable heaters

Avoid leaving your heater unattended and don't use it while you're sleeping. Keep your heater away from paper, furniture, clothing and curtains.

Sign up for priority services

Energy suppliers and distribution network operators have Priority Services Registers for people who need extra help. This could be because you're over pension age or living with a long-term health condition or disability. You might need support temporarily following an injury or illness. If you sign up for priority services you could get extra support if there's a power cut, such as regular updates.

Your distribution network operator is the company in charge of the electricity supply to your area. Contact the Energy Networks Association (see page 26) to find out who your network operator is.

To make sure you get as many of these services as possible you should join both your supplier's register and your distribution network operator's register, as they may offer different things.

If you have a power cut

Call 105 free of charge. You will be put through to your local electricity network operator who can give you help and advice.

what next?

Contact Electrical Safety First (see page 26) for more information on electrical safety or to find a registered electrician. Visit their website to download their guide *Electrical safety in the home: A guide for older people and their relatives*.

Preventing falls

There are lots of simple things you can do in your home to reduce your risk of falling.

Look out for trip hazards in each room

- To avoid tripping over cords or wires, coil them up or tape them close to the wall. If you can, organise your appliances so that they are close to a plug socket.
- Arrange your furniture to help you move around your home more easily.
- Clear away clutter. Items lying around the home or on the stairs can be a trip hazard. Fire can also spread more quickly if you have lots of newspapers and magazines lying around.
- Replace worn-out or fraying carpets, or use double-sided carpet tape to help prevent them slipping. Loose rugs and mats can cause falls and should be removed or secured
- Look out for loose sheets and bedcovers trailing on the floor. Tuck them out of the way so they don't trip you up when you're moving around.

Use properly fitted footwear

Worn-out or badly fitting slippers can increase your risk of falling. Be careful when wearing long, loose-fitting clothing in case you trip, particularly when on the stairs.

Avoid slips and trips

Try to clean up any spills or dropped food straight away. Non-slip matting can help reduce the risk of slipping.

Use step ladders carefully

Step ladders offer stability and safety when you're changing a light bulb or reaching for something high up. Use a step ladder rather than standing on chairs or other furniture. Never use a ladder when you're on your own.

Get help for small repairs

Some local Age UKs offer a handyman scheme for older people who meet certain criteria, to assist with small repairs and identify home hazards (see page 27). Alternatively, there may be a Home Improvement Agency (HIA) in your area offering similar help. Contact Foundations, the national body for HIAs, or your local council (see page 27).

-  In Wales, contact your local Age Cymru to find out if there's a handyman or HandyVan scheme in your area (see page 25) or contact Care and Repair Cymru (see page 27). In Scotland, contact Care and Repair Scotland (see page 27). In Northern Ireland check with Age NI for local availability of handyman schemes (see page 25).

Consider a personal alarm

If you fall, a personal alarm lets you contact a 24-hour response centre at the touch of a button. Many councils run personal alarm schemes. Contact your local council to find out more or search www.gov.uk/apply-for-community-alarm. PPP Taking Care Limited, a subsidiary of AXA PPP healthcare Group Limited, also provides Age UK branded personal alarms, including within Northern Ireland.* For more information about the service and the likely costs, call 0800 011 3846.

-  In Scotland, contact Care Information Scotland for more information about alarms and telehealthcare (see page 26).

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Install bathroom aids

You may want to consider a handrail, non-slip bathmat or a bath seat. These can help you to keep your balance when getting in and out of the bath. Make sure your bath mat is secure and doesn't slide – get a non-slip rubber mat or use self-stick strips. If you're having new flooring fitted, make sure it's non-slip. If you find it difficult getting in and out of the bath safely, contact the occupational therapy department of your local social services for an assessment.

-  In Scotland, contact your local social work department and in Northern Ireland, contact your local Health and Social Care Trust.

Check the stairs

You should have handrails on all staircases, ideally on both sides, even on small flights. If you live in rented accommodation, contact the landlord if the banisters are loose or broken. Marking the edge of each step with paint or non-slip masking tape will make them more visible. Make sure that the tape doesn't become a trip hazard.

Get a letterbox cage

This can save you having to stoop to pick up your post. It can also stop papers being spread across the floor, which could cause you to slip.

Check pets

Dogs and cats like to stay close, often curling up at your feet. Check where your pet is before you take a step.

what next?

-  For more information about preventing falls, see our free information guide *Staying steady*. In Wales, Age Cymru also has a free guide *Avoiding slips, trips and falls*. If you need help with small home adaptations, contact your local Age UK to see if there's a handyperson scheme in your area (see page 27). Our free guide *Adapting your home* and free factsheet *Home improvements and repairs* have more information.

Lighting

Good lighting becomes even more important as we get older because our eyes need more light to see well. Try these simple suggestions to keep your home well lit and safe.

Use bright bulbs

Good lighting is particularly important on the stairs. The brightness of a lightbulb is now measured in lumens, which is indicated on the box. The higher the number of lumens, the brighter the bulb (e.g. 1,500 lumens is equal to about 100 watts). Remember that low-energy lightbulbs can fade over time, so change them when that happens.

Keep a lamp or torch beside your bed

This can help if you need to get up in the night. A touch-sensitive bedside lamp avoids you having to search for light switches in the dark, and a torch can be helpful.

Try night lights

These turn on automatically at night time and provide a low light that can help you see your way to the bathroom or on the stairs if you get up at night.

Be prepared for power cuts

Consider emergency power-failure lights that plug in to power sockets and remain lit if there's a power failure. This means that if the mains power fails after dark, you'll still be able to find your way around. Keep a torch on hand to use during a power cut, too.

Two-way light switches may be useful

This is a switch at the top and bottom of the stairs that controls the same light. You should contact an electrician to fit one, or a local Home Improvement Agency (HIA) may be able to help.

-  Contact Foundations (see page 27) or Care and Repair in Scotland or Wales (see page 27) for more information about HIAs.

**what
next?**

Contact the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) for further advice on lighting in the home (see page 28).



Night lights turn on automatically at night time and **provide a low light** that can help you see your way to the bathroom or on the stairs **if you get up at night.**

Safety when cooking

Safety is especially important in the kitchen so that you can prepare and enjoy your food safely. Here are some simple tips to make your kitchen as safe as possible.

Clear counter space near the cooker

This will allow you to put hot pots and pans down safely.

Put the things you use every day within easy reach

Rearrange your shelves and cupboards so that the things you use most often can be reached easily, or use a long-handled 'grabber' to avoid stretching or reaching up high.

Try a cordless kettle

These reduce the risk of accidentally scalding yourself by catching the cord. Look for a low-capacity kettle which will be lighter to lift when full.

Turn pan handles away from the front of the cooker

Turn pan handles towards the sides of your cooker to help you avoid catching them or accidentally knocking them over, but be sure to keep them away from the other heat rings.

Use a timer to remind yourself when food is ready

Never leave food unattended while cooking. Always set a timer so you don't forget about your cooking. Ovens and microwaves may have built-in timers that you can use, or you can buy a kitchen timer.

Microwave safety

Microwaves are convenient but there are some materials that you shouldn't put in them. Never put metal items, tin foil, plastic tubs that are meant to be disposable (such as yoghurt pots), or Styrofoam products in a microwave.

Keep flammable items away from the hob

Make sure that tea towels, kitchen roll, oven gloves and paper bags are kept away from the cooker. Never leave hot oil unattended, as it's a fire risk.

Keep your kitchen equipment as clean as possible

A build-up of crumbs or grease, for instance, could be a fire risk.

Take care when carrying food

Use a tray or trolley when carrying hot food and drinks to avoid the risk of burns and scalds.

If a pan catches fire

Don't move the pan and never throw water on it as this can create a fireball. Turn off the heat, if it's safe to do so. Do not try to move the pan or put the fire out yourself using a wet tea towel, as you risk injuring yourself. Leave the kitchen, close the door and shout to anyone else in the house to leave. Call 999.

what next?

Contact RoSPA (Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents) (see page 29) for more information on safety in the kitchen.

Safety outside and around the home

Getting outside in the fresh air is good for you. Here are some simple things to check to make outdoor areas near your home safer.

Clear garden paths

Keep your garden tidy and free from obstacles and check for cracked or loose paving stones.

Check paving stones for moss and algae

Moss and algae become very slippery when wet. You can prevent them growing by pruning overhanging branches to improve the air circulation and light. You can also clear them using a power washer or a chemical product. Keep your gutters clear and clean because leaking gutters can cause moss and algae to form on paths, and lead to icy surfaces during the winter.

Take care in icy weather

Spread salt or sand on your steps if you need to go outside when it's very cold. Some councils offer a free bag of gritting salt or sand to every household each winter but you may need to collect it. Shoes and boots with good grip will also help you to walk confidently in icy conditions. Consider buying ice grippers to wear over your footwear.

Use step ladders carefully

Use a step ladder at a safe angle and make sure it's anchored at its base. Never use a ladder when you're on your own; it's safer to have someone with you who can hold the ladder steady.

Lock tools away

Always use tools carefully and place them in a safe position when you put them down. Locking them away in a small shed where they're out of sight and out of reach is ideal.

Use residual current devices (RCDs)

An RCD will prevent you from getting a potentially fatal electric shock by shutting off the power if an electrical fault develops or if you accidentally cut through the flex when using power tools or electric motors.

Safe chemical storage is important

Prevent accidental poisoning by carefully following the instructions when using weed killers and household cleaners. Never transfer them into a different bottle as this could cause confusion. Always lock harmful substances away safely.

what next?

Contact [Electrical Safety First](#) (see page 26) for more information on electrical safety or to find a registered electrician. Visit their website to download their guide *Electrical safety in the home: A guide for older people and their relatives*.

Home security

Taking a few simple precautions to make your home more secure can give you peace of mind.

Be careful when opening the door to a stranger. Remember: **Not sure? Don't open the door.** Don't be embarrassed to tell a stranger to go away.

If you're suspicious about a doorstep caller, dial 999 and ask for the police.

If you have a door chain, only use it when you're planning to open it to check on a caller. Keeping a chain on all the time may prevent carers or the emergency services from entering if they are needed.

what next?



For more information about staying safe at home, see our free guides *Staying safe* and *Avoiding scams*. In Northern Ireland there's a Quick Check police helpline that you can call to find out if someone is a bogus caller (see page 28).

In case of an emergency

It's a good idea to have an easy-to-read list of emergency phone numbers beside each phone. List details of important contacts, close friends, relatives and anyone else you think may be useful. It's useful to have a phone by your bed as well in case you need to call someone from your bedroom.

Key contacts list:

In case of emergency, please contact (e.g. contact details of family, relatives or neighbours):

1.
2.
3.

Emergency services (fire, ambulance, police): 999

Gas emergency services: 0800 111 999

Power cut service: 105

Insurance claims:

Insurance home emergency helpline:

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Useful organisations

Age UK

We provide advice and information for people in later life through our Age UK Advice line, publications and online.

Age UK Advice: 0800 169 65 65

Lines are open seven days a week from 8am to 7pm.

www.ageuk.org.uk

Call Age UK Advice to find out whether there is a local Age UK near you, and to order free copies of our information guides and factsheets.

In Wales, contact

Age Cymru: 0800 022 3444

www.agecymru.org.uk

In Northern Ireland, contact

Age NI: 0808 808 7575

www.ageni.org

In Scotland, contact:

Age Scotland: 0800 124 4222

www.agescotland.org.uk

The evidence sources used to create this guide are available on request. Contact resources@ageuk.org.uk

Action on Hearing Loss

Provides advice and support for people who are deaf or hard of hearing through an information line, tinnitus helpline and range of factsheets.

Tel: 0808 808 0123

Textphone: 0808 808 9000

www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk

Care Information Scotland

Provides information about care services and carer support for people living in Scotland.

Tel: 0800 011 3200

www.careinfoscotland.scot

Disabled Living Foundation

Provides impartial advice on products and equipment that help with daily living.

Tel: 0300 999 0004

www.dlf.org.uk

Electrical Safety First

Provides free guides and advice on electrical safety in the home and garden.

Tel: 020 3463 5100

www.electricalsafetyfirst.org.uk

Energy Networks Association

Contact them to find out who your network operator is.

Tel: 020 7706 5100

www.energynetworks.org

Foundations

National body for Home Improvement Agencies (HIAs) and handyperson schemes, with a website you can use to find your nearest one in England.

Tel: 0300 124 0315
wwwFOUNDATIONS.uk.com

In Scotland, contact **Care and Repair Scotland**

Tel: 0141 221 9879
www.careandrepairsScotland.co.uk

In Wales, contact **Care and Repair Cymru**

Tel: 0300 111 3333
www.careandrepair.org.uk

Gas Safe Register

Provides help and advice on gas safety. They maintain the register of individuals and businesses who meet strict health and safety standards to install or repair gas appliances. You can check if an engineer is on the register by visiting the website or by calling the free consumer helpline. All registered engineers carry an official photo ID card which displays their engineer's licence number and qualifications.

Tel: 0800 408 5500
Textphone: 0800 408 0606
www.gassaferegister.co.uk

Handyperson scheme

Over 70 local Age UKs operate handyperson services across much of the country. These services offer older people extra help with small practical jobs – from putting up curtain rails to installing energy efficient light bulbs or putting on a door chain. These are usually charged-for services, and the cost will depend on the nature of the work required. To find out details of your local Age UK, please call Age UK Advice on 0800 169 65 65.

Heating Equipment Testing and Approval Scheme (HETAS)

The official body for approving solid fuel appliances has a register of installers, chimney sweeps and servicers.

Tel: 01684 278 170

www.hetas.co.uk

National Association for Professional Inspectors and Testers (NAPIT)

Can provide details of qualified electricians and installers.

Tel: 0345 543 0330

www.napit.org.uk

National Grid Gas Emergency Number

If you smell gas, call the 24-hour gas emergency number.

Tel: 0800 111 999

Textphone: 0800 371 787

Police Service of Northern Ireland

Has a Quick Check helpline for those at risk to check whether a doorstep caller is authentic and to give advice and support.

Tel: 101 for general enquiries and non-emergencies

Quick Check: 0800 013 2290

www.psni.police.uk

RNIB (Royal National Institute of Blind People)

Has information on lighting in the home and advice about sight loss.

Tel: 0303 123 9999

www.rnib.org.uk

RoSPA (Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents)

Provides detailed advice on specific safety problems.

Tel: 0121 248 2000

www.rospa.com

Scottish Fire and Rescue Service

Provides free fire checks and smoke alarm installation.

Tel: 0800 0731 999

www.firescotland.gov.uk

Trading Standards Institute

National consumer helpline for help and advice, or to make a complaint. Online search directory to find an approved trader.

Tel: 0345 404 0506

www.tradingstandards.uk/consumers

In Wales, visit www.tradingstandardswales.org.uk

UK Fire Service

Provides information on fire safety and the UK Fire and Rescue Service. The website contains a directory of all the fire and rescue services in the UK.

www.fireservice.co.uk

Supporting the work of Age UK

Age UK aims to enable all older people to love later life. We provide vital services, support, information and advice to thousands of older people across the UK.

In order to offer free information guides like this one, Age UK relies on the generosity of its supporters. If you would like to help us, here are a few ways you could get involved:

1 Make a donation
To make a donation to Age UK, simply complete the enclosed donation form, call us on **0800 169 8787** or visit **www.ageuk.org.uk/get-involved**

2 Donate items to our shops
By donating an unwanted item to one of our shops, you can help generate vital funds to support our work. To find your nearest Age UK shop, visit **www.ageuk.org.uk** and enter your postcode into the ‘What does Age UK do in your area?’ search function. Alternatively, call us on **0800 169 8787**

3 Leave a gift in your will
Nearly half the money we receive from supporters come from gifts left in wills. To find out more about how you could help in this way, please call the Age UK legacy team on **020 3033 1421** or email **legacies@ageuk.org.uk**



**Thank
you!**

What should I do now?

For more information on the issues covered in this guide, or to order any of our publications, please call Age UK Advice free on **0800 169 65 65** or visit www.ageuk.org.uk/homeandcare

Our publications are also available in large print and audio formats.



The Age UK Group offers a wide range of products and services specially designed for people in later life. For more information, please call **0800 169 18 19**.

If contact details for your local Age UK are not in the box below, call Age UK Advice free on **0800 169 65 65**.

