

Caregiver's Corner Column (October 2014)

Environmental Challenges and Opportunities

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As we age, we often face new challenges related to our bodies changing needs. Our senses can be desensitized or hypersensitive, often changing daily and are capable of influencing our mood. Our environment can play a larger role than we would normally assume. Our environment can affect our mood, our ability to function and our safety. This is especially true for family caregivers and those older persons for whom they provide care.

There are positive health implications linked to healthy interiors, including safe environments, comfortable spaces, and access to fresh air and the outdoors, even if only by sight. Some of the most common areas of concern are those associated with flooring, lighting, and space. These areas can be addressed in our residential homes, assisted living communities, hospitals and long-term care settings, often with minimal modification and expense.

Some of the environmental challenges associated with flooring, lighting, and space include rugs and bath mats, low lighting, electrical cords, air quality, furniture placement, dark colors and patterns on the floor or wall.

As we age, our eyes become more sensitive. More sensitive to glare, color contrast, size or style of font and often require longer periods of time to adjust. Some things to consider with lighting are installing an illuminated light switch which can be seen easily at night. Having a light to act as a focal point in bathroom for example is also a safe reminder. Consider, Touch activated lamps, motion lighting, or LED night lights. Battery operated devices are encouraged to help reduce the need for electricity use and to avoid the extra electrical cords which can also be a safety concern. Additional considerations should be given to lighting of pathways, stairwells and under cabinets.

When it comes to space, less can be more. Remove clutter and provide clear, direct paths. Reduce unnecessary items or items that are not secure, such as a chair on wheels, a rug or bath mat that can trip you up. Promote safety and security through increasing the usable floor space which can be easily navigated or through the installation of secure grab bars in a bathroom or bedroom area.

Contrast in flooring and walls can provide a not so obvious challenge. Lighter colors on ceiling and walls tend to reflect more light, while dark colors absorb the light. Additional consideration should be given to paint and flooring color due to changes in depth perception. Stark contrasts in flooring or a variation between patterns & colors can be tricky or deceiving. A helpful color contrast can be put to use in the bathroom. Paint the wall behind the toilet a different color than

the remaining walls or flooring to provide a focal point and so as not to overwhelm with one continuous color.

Finally, it is important to consider the quality of the air we breathe. Access to the outdoors whether physically or visibly is shown to enhance quality of life and is associated with faster recovery. If access to outdoors is limited, bring plants indoors to act as natural filters as well as to provide aesthetics.

Our environment plays as big a part in our health and recovery as individuals and caregivers. Perform an environmental assessment to identify hazards and potential areas of improvement. Explore the options; take appropriate measures to sustain your health and well-being as well as that of those for whom you provide care.

Caregiver's Corner is provided as a public service of the **Caregiver Resource Network**. The Caregiver Resource Network is a collaboration of West Michigan organizations dedicated to providing for the needs and welfare of family and professional caregivers within the community. Funded by the Area Agency on Aging of Western Michigan with Older American's Act Title III-E, Family Caregiver Support funds. For more information consult our website at www.CaregiverResource.net or call toll free at 1-888-456-5664.