



**Independent
Age**



Home safety

**How to spot risks and
prevent accidents**



Thank you

We would like to thank those who shared their experiences as this guide was being developed, and those who reviewed it for us. Our special thanks go to the teams at RoSPA, RNIB and Essex Fire Service for their support and expert advice during this review.

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Production: Independent Age

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Photography: Leanne Benson cover, p3, 12, 27, 51, 55, 60, 62, 64;

Centre for Ageing Better p33, 40, 42, 47

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Date of publication: April 2023

Next review date: August 2025

We spoke to older people about their experiences. Their quotes appear throughout. We have changed the names of some of the interviewees who wished to be anonymous. Some of the images seen throughout this guide are posed by friends of Independent Age.

The PIF TICK is the UK-wide Quality Mark for Health Information.

About this guide

Most of us spend a lot of time at home and we all want to feel safe there. Spending more time at home may make it more likely you'll come across hazards and accidents, but you can keep yourself from harm by being aware of danger areas and unsafe habits.

This guide can help you identify some of the common risks in your home and advise you on ways to prevent accidents. There are some simple checks you can do yourself. You can also get help to keep you safe and well.



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1. How safe is your home?

There are some simple measures you can put in place to keep you safe at home.

1. How safe is your home?

Take this quick quiz to see how safety conscious you are.

1. Are your hall and stairs well lit and free from clutter?
2. Do you have any handrails in the bathroom and on the stairs, ideally on both sides?
3. Are all your carpets and rugs secured down?
4. Do you have a working smoke alarm? And:
 - is it tested regularly?
 - do you have one on every floor – including the basement, if you have one?
 - are they positioned in an appropriate place, like high up on the wall or on the ceiling?
 - are they in appropriate parts of your home, such as the bedroom or landing/hall?
 - if you have a hearing impairment, do you have an alternative way of being alerted, such as a visual or vibrating alert?
5. Do you know how you'd escape in a fire?

6. Do you know when the electrics in your home were last checked?
7. Has your boiler or solid fuel heater – and chimney, if you have one – been serviced in the past year?
8. Have you got a carbon monoxide alarm?
Does it work and is it tested once a month?
9. Do you know where to find your:
 - mains water stopcock or stop tap – this turns off the cold water
 - fuse box
 - electricity meter
 - gas meter?
10. Can you get to them easily?

If you could answer 'yes' to most of these questions, you're probably quite safety conscious, but there may be some hazards you're not aware of. If you were unsure about any of these, this guide has advice to help you improve your home safety.

1. How safe is your home?

Getting help

Sometimes it can be hard to spot hazards when you're used to living with them every day. You could ask friends or family to help you carry out a home safety check or try another source of help.

Most local fire services offer free Safe and Well visits – also called home fire safety checks – if you meet the criteria. They'll identify potential fire risks in your home, advise you how to minimise those risks and work out a fire escape plan with you. They may fit smoke alarms or test any that you have.



To do

Contact your local fire and rescue service to book a visit. You can find their contact details in the phone directory or on the Chief Fire Officers Association website (nationalfirechiefs.org.uk/fire-and-rescue-services). Safe and Well visits may also include advice on your health and wellbeing, preventing crime and avoiding falls.



Good to know

For extra support if you have a power cut, you may be able to sign up to the UK Power Networks Priority Services Register. For more information, visit **ukpowernetworks.co.uk/power-cut/priority-services/about-the-priority-services-register**. You can also call your energy company to ask about this.

If you've recently had a fall or you're at risk of having one, you may be offered a home hazard assessment. Ask your GP or local council if you think you need one.

If the assessment is available in your area, a trained professional, usually in the occupational therapy team, will visit you at home. They will identify possible risks and advise you how to deal with them. They'll also look at how you move around in your home.

You can also request a free care needs assessment from your council if you need more help at home or think you need aids or adaptations to help you stay safe. This might include telecare, such as alarms, movement sensors or pill dispensers.

Our guide **Getting help at home** has more information.

1. How safe is your home?



Help with home maintenance and repairs

You can find reliable tradespeople through Trustmark, a government-backed scheme (**0333 555 1234**, trustmark.org.uk/find-a-tradesman) or Buy With Confidence (**01392 383430**, buywithconfidence.gov.uk). You could also ask your friends and neighbours for recommendations.

Your local Home Improvement Agency may be able to help make sure your home is safe:

- for England, contact Find My HIA (**0300 124 0315**, **findmyhia.org.uk**)
- for Scotland, contact Care & Repair Scotland (**0141 221 9879**, **careandrepairsotland.co.uk**)
- for Wales, contact Care & Repair Cymru (**0300 111 3333**, **careandrepair.org.uk/en**).

Your local Age UK may also offer a handy person service for a small fee (**0800 169 6565**, **ageuk.org.uk/services/in-your-area/handyperson-services**).



Our factsheet **Paying for home maintenance and repairs** has information about help and grants that may be available to you.

If you want to know more about protecting your home from crime, see our guide **Home security**.

1. How safe is your home?

If you rent

Landlords have some legal responsibilities for health and safety in your home:

- All landlords have a duty to make sure that the gas supply and electrical installation in rental homes is safe. They should arrange regular safety checks by a registered electrician for any electrical appliances they provide. They must also get a registered Gas Safe engineer to carry out an annual safety inspection on all gas appliances they provide.
- They must make sure that any furniture they supply at the start of the tenancy meets safety standards – for example, upholstered furniture must be fire resistant.
- Private landlords must fit working smoke alarms on each floor. They must also fit a carbon monoxide alarm in any room with a solid-fuel-burning appliance, such as a wood burner or coal fireplace. You are responsible for checking that the alarms work during your tenancy.

If you're concerned about the safety of your rented property, seek advice. Contact Citizens Advice:

- in England – **0800 144 8848**
- in Wales – **0800 702 2020**
- in Scotland – **0800 028 1456**
- or visit **citizensadvice.org.uk**.

If you feel you may be at risk of harm, you could call Shelter:

- in England – **0808 800 4444, shelter.org.uk**
- in Wales – **08000 495 495, sheltercymru.org.uk**
- in Scotland – **0808 800 4444, scotland.shelter.org.uk**.

“ Your landlord should make sure your home is safe for you to live in. If you are worried about talking to your landlord, it's important to get advice about your rights.

Hollie, Independent Age Advice team



2. Avoiding falls

Anyone can have a fall but, as we get older, the risk of falling and of this leading to a serious injury increases.

Certain health conditions, the side effects of some medications, changes to your sight or hearing – which may also affect your balance – or even fear of falling can all make you more vulnerable to falls.

Most falls don't result in serious injury, but they can affect your confidence. Being prepared can make it easier to avoid falls or deal with them better if they do happen.

Look after yourself

- If you're physically active, you're less likely to have a fall. Try to do some regular light exercise to improve your balance and muscle strength.
- Speak to your GP if you haven't exercised in a while or have a disability. They might be able to give you exercises to do at home or recommend local exercise classes. Your local council may have information about exercise groups in your area, or you could look on [ageuk.org.uk/services/in-your-area/exercise](https://www.ageuk.org.uk/services/in-your-area/exercise). Staying active may also reduce your fear of falling.



For more tips on how to start getting active, see our **Winterwise** guide. This guide also includes a visual guide about how to get up from a fall.

2. Avoiding falls

- Make sure you have regular hearing and eye tests. You can get free eye tests every two years if you're over 60, or more frequently if your optician advises you. Contact your GP to arrange a hearing test and RNID for more information about your hearing (**0800 808 0123**, rnid.org.uk).
- Take care of your feet. Talk to your GP to find out if you're able to get free NHS foot care services. Or you can contact the College of Podiatry to find a registered chiropodist or podiatrist in your area (**020 7234 8620**, cop.org.uk/find-a-podiatrist).
- Make sure you eat a balanced diet to help keep your bones strong. It should include calcium-rich food such as cheese and milk, and vitamin D. Taking supplements can be effective – ask your GP or pharmacist for advice.
- Some medication can increase your risk of falls, especially if you're taking more than one. If you're on medication, it's important to manage it well – see **chapter 9**.

Check for hazards in your home

Falls can easily happen around the home – for example, when you're reaching or bending for things, rushing for the toilet at night, or trying to fix something. There are some simple things you can do to prevent them.

Do

- ✓ Make sure your home is well lit.
- ✓ Keep your home free from clutter – especially the hall, landing, doorways and stairs.
- ✓ Mop up any spillages straightaway.
- ✓ Repair frayed carpet edges and secure loose carpets or flooring.
- ✓ Consider installing grab rails in the bathroom and a second handrail on the stairs.
- ✓ Have somewhere to sit in the bathroom or kitchen if you're prone to dizzy spells.
- ✓ Use a non-slip mat in the bath or shower.
- ✓ Look out for your pets when you're moving around.

2. Avoiding falls

Don't

- ✗ Leave cables and wires trailing across the floor.
- ✗ Walk around in the dark – consider getting motion-activated lights.
- ✗ Leave things on the stairs.
- ✗ Use a stepladder if you're on your own or prone to dizzy spells – ask someone to help. Never stand on chairs.



Good to know

For advice, videos and checklists on preventing falls, see RoSPA's Web Hub (rospa.com/home-safety/advice/falls-prevention/later-life).

You can get help to check for hazards, for example, from your local council's occupational therapy team – see **chapter 1**. You could also consider getting telecare such as a personal alarm to call for help if you do have a fall.

If you have sight loss, the Thomas Pocklington Trust has a useful guide to improving lighting in your home (**020 8995 0880**, pocklington-trust.org.uk/supporting-you/useful-guides/lighting-guides-for-you).



Our factsheets **Adapting your home to stay independent** and **Technology to help you at home** have more information.

“ My mum fell out of bed and waited for hours to use her alarm because she didn't want to bother anyone. She was incredibly lucky to find she hadn't broken anything when the paramedics eventually got her to hospital. She did learn from the experience and used the alarm after that when she needed to.

2. Avoiding falls

Falls can have a serious effect on your health and wellbeing so don't ignore them. There is help and support available. If you have a fall, talk to your GP or social worker – they may refer you to a falls clinic, for example. This can find out why you fell and provide extra help to prevent it happening again, such as physiotherapy.

What to do if you have a fall

- Stay calm and don't try to move immediately.
- Check whether you are hurt.
- Look for something stable to hold on to.
- Slowly get up if you're not hurt.
- Sit for a while and rest.

If you can't get up:

- Keep warm – reach for a blanket or cover yourself with a coat or rug.
- Try to keep moving to maintain circulation.
- Make some noise to attract attention.
- If you have a personal alarm, use it! Don't worry about bothering people.
- If you don't have an alarm and can get to a phone, call 999.



3. Fire safety

Fires can start suddenly and spread quickly. There are a number of things to consider to help prevent them.

3. Fire safety

Some of the most common causes of fire are:

- smoking
- faulty electrical appliances
- leaving cooking or candles unattended
- over-charging electrical equipment
- overloading sockets.

Candles, electric blankets, coal fires and heaters are also all possible sources of fires.

Fires are more of a risk as we get older. It may be difficult to keep up with home maintenance, and being less mobile or having sensory impairments – such as loss of hearing, sight, smell or touch – can reduce our ability to detect fires. Some medications and alcohol or substance misuse are also risk factors.

Reducing the risk

Contact your local fire service to see if they can arrange a Safe and Well visit (also called a home fire safety visit). They will assess your home for risks and advise you on an escape plan. They may install smoke alarms. See **chapter 1** for more information. You can also get fire safety tips from **[gov.uk/firekills](https://www.gov.uk/firekills)**.

Alarms

Smoke alarms can detect a fire in its early stages and give you vital extra minutes to get out. You should have at least one on each floor. Test them regularly – about once a month – and keep them clean. Vacuum them gently with a soft brush attachment every three months. You could ask someone to help you if your smoke alarms are hard to reach.

If you have a battery-powered smoke alarm, you should replace the batteries every year or you can buy alarms with 10-year sealed batteries. You should replace your smoke alarm every 10 years.

You can get special smoke alarms if you have sight or hearing loss. Contact RNID (**0808 808 0123**, **rnid.org.uk**), Sense (**0300 330 9256**, **sense.org.uk**), RNIB (**0303 123 9999**, **rnib.org.uk**) or your local fire service to find out more. Your local fire service might fit these too.

“ We had a free alarm and safety check from a fire safety officer. He replaced our outdated alarm and helped us plan our escape route. It was very informative.

3. Fire safety

Know your escape plan

Plan and practise an escape route. Here are some things to consider:

- Keep the route free from clutter. Make sure there's nothing in corridors or on stairways that could block your way.
- If you have sight loss, you could mark your escape route out of your home with tactile indicators such as raised bumps. Contact RNIB for more information (**0303 123 9999**, rnib.org.uk).
- Keep your walking stick or other mobility aid close by.
- Any closed door can hold back a fire. Close internal doors at night and when you go out.
- Keep a charged phone in your bedroom, so you can call for help if you need to.

“ If you have one, keep a mobile phone within easy reach and make sure it's sufficiently charged.

Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service



Good to know

You can register with your local fire service if you have sight, hearing or mobility issues or if you use oxygen. In an emergency, the fire crew who attend will be told about your situation.

Contact the Chief Fire Officers Association (nationalfirechiefs.org.uk/fire-and-rescue-services) for more information.



3. Fire safety

If you smoke

Falling asleep while smoking is one of the most common causes of smoking-related fires. Don't smoke if you're drowsy or anywhere you might fall asleep. Never leave cigarettes, cigars or pipes unattended and make sure you put them out properly in a deep ashtray.

If you use e-cigarettes or vaping products, only buy them from reputable retailers and follow the manufacturers' instructions when charging them. Badly made or counterfeit chargers can cause house fires.

Skin creams

If you use a paraffin-based skin cream or lotion, keep away from fire, flames and cigarettes to reduce the fire risk. Even after washing items that have been exposed to paraffin-based cream, there may still be a risk. If you have any concerns, or want to try a water-based product, ask your doctor for advice.

Before you go to bed

Many fires in the home start at night. Make it part of your routine to do a bedtime check.

Close internal doors.

Turn off and unplug electrical appliances unless they're designed to be left on – for example, your fridge. It's not enough just to switch them off at the socket.

Check your cooker is turned off.

Put candles and cigarettes out properly.

Turn heaters off and put up fireguards.

Make sure exits are clear.

Keep door and window keys where everyone in your home can find them easily.

Keep a torch near your bedside – most smart phones also have torches.

3. Fire safety

What to do in an emergency

Get out, stay out and call 999.

Try to stay calm. Don't attempt to put the fire out – leave it to the fire service. You can also call if you smell burning but don't know where it's coming from. Fire services have equipment that can detect sources of heat.

If you're unable to remove yourself safely in an emergency, or have difficulty doing so, visit **[gov.uk/government/publications/fire-safety-for-people-with-sight-hearing-or-mobility-difficulties](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/fire-safety-for-people-with-sight-hearing-or-mobility-difficulties)** for advice.



4. Electrical safety

Electricity can cause fires and electrical accidents can be fatal.

4. Electrical safety

You can avoid many risks by regularly checking your electrics for faults and using products safely:

- Examine any cables for wear, especially if they're hidden behind furniture, and get your wiring checked by a registered electrician at least every 10 years.
- Keep all your gadgets and electrical appliances clean and in good working order to avoid electrical fires, and check the plugs and wires.
- When you buy electrical appliances, make sure they have a British or European safety mark.
- Never try to fix appliances while they're still plugged in. Unplug appliances when you're not using them or at night. As well as preventing fires, switching off and unplugging them will save you electricity and money.
- Water conducts electricity so you should never bring mains-powered appliances, such as heaters, hairdryers or radios, into a bathroom. Don't switch off a plug with wet hands.

Electric blankets and portable heaters

If you use an electric blanket, you should get it tested after three years and look out for signs of wear such as scorch marks, worn flex or frayed material. Never use a hot water bottle and an electric blanket together, even if the blanket is switched off. Don't use an electric blanket if you have continence problems.

Portable heaters should be placed on a level surface at least one metre (three feet) away from anything that could catch fire. Don't use them to dry your clothes, and don't leave them on overnight or when you're not there.



4. Electrical safety

Sockets and extension leads

Do

- ✓ Check your plugs and sockets for any damage. They shouldn't have burn marks, give off excessive heat or make crackling noises. The same goes for light fittings.
- ✓ Make sure you keep anything that could catch fire easily away from fuse boxes and electricity meters. This equipment is often found in a cupboard under the stairs where you might also store coats, ironing boards and other flammable things. Keep the cupboard door closed.
- ✓ Check that you have RCD (residual current device) protection in your fuse box. This automatically switches off your electricity if there's a fault and can help to prevent fires. To see if an RCD is fitted, look for a device with a pushbutton marked T or Test on your fuse box.

Don't

- ✘ Overload sockets, extension leads or adaptors. Appliances use different amounts of power, so be careful how many you plug in.
- ✘ Plug one extension lead into another.
- ✘ Try to repair damaged extension leads – get rid of them.
- ✘ Use reeled extension leads.



4. Electrical safety

Register your appliances

If you buy white goods – such as washing machines and fridges – register them with the manufacturer so you can get any product safety updates. You can register second-hand products as well. Contact the manufacturer directly or register them on **registermyappliance.org.uk**.

Some people use electrical appliances, such as washing machines, at night to take advantage of cheaper rates of electricity. The fire service advises against this because a fire at night can go unnoticed for longer and spread further.



You can get more advice and information – including help with avoiding overloading sockets – from Electrical Safety First (**electricalsafetyfirst.org.uk**).



5. Gas, oil and solid fuel safety

Gas appliances such as fires, boilers, cookers and central heating systems must be properly installed.

5. Gas, oil and solid fuel safety

These appliances should be serviced regularly, and safety checked every year by a registered gas engineer. By law, all gas engineers must be on the Gas Safe Register (**0800 408 5500**, **gassaferegister.co.uk**). They carry ID that tells you what appliances they're qualified to work on.



Good to know

If you've reached your State Pension age and receive certain benefits, you may be able to get a free gas safety check from your supplier. Contact them and ask to be put on their Priority Services Register. You may also qualify if you're disabled or have a long-term health condition.

If your appliance uses a solid fuel such as coal or wood, get it cleaned and serviced regularly by a HETAS registered installer (**01684 278170**, **hetas.co.uk**). If you use an oil appliance, contact OFTEC (**01473 626298**, **oftec.org**).

It's illegal to use a gas appliance if you know it to be unsafe. Turn it off and don't touch it until it's been inspected by a Gas Safe registered engineer. The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) runs a free Gas Safety Advice Line if you need more information about gas safety (**0800 300 363**, [hse.gov.uk/gas/domestic](https://www.hse.gov.uk/gas/domestic)). If you smell gas, call their free 24-hour emergency helpline on **0800 111 999**.

Ventilation

All gas appliances need enough air to work properly. Never block ventilation points, even if you feel they're draughty, and make sure the flue is kept clear at all times. If you can't see all or part of your flue, you can get inspection hatches or a carbon monoxide alarm fitted.

Get your chimney checked regularly to make sure it's not blocked, so the fumes can go up and out and to prevent a chimney fire from starting. You can find a chimney sweep by contacting the National Association of Chimney Sweeps (**01785 336555**, [nacs.org.uk](https://www.nacs.org.uk)) or by asking friends and neighbours for a recommendation.

5. Gas, oil and solid fuel safety

Carbon monoxide

If your gas, oil or solid fuel appliances don't burn properly, they can produce carbon monoxide, which is extremely dangerous. You can't see, smell or taste carbon monoxide – but there may be some warning signs:

- a lazy yellow flame rather than a crisp blue one on your cooker
- black stains on or around appliances
- a pilot light that keeps going out
- increased condensation inside windows.

“ Make sure your heating and cooking appliances are regularly serviced by a registered engineer and are in good working order. An audible CO alarm is also essential, giving you early warning so you can take action.

RoSPA

Breathing in carbon monoxide can give you symptoms similar to a cold, flu or food poisoning. These include headaches, drowsiness, feeling sick and vomiting, stomach pain, tiredness and confusion, dizziness and shortness of breath. Carbon monoxide poisoning can be fatal. It's especially dangerous when you're asleep and unaware of the early symptoms.

An audible carbon monoxide alarm can give you an early warning. You should have one fitted in every room where there is a gas, oil or solid fuel appliance. You can buy them from DIY stores, supermarkets or from your energy supplier.



Remember

If you rent, your landlord must fit a carbon monoxide alarm.

5. Gas, oil and solid fuel safety

Here are some other things to keep in mind with carbon monoxide alarms:

- If you buy one, make sure it has a Kitemark and complies with British safety standards. This shows that products have been independently safety tested.
- You need to test the alarm regularly. Some smoke alarms for people who are deaf or hard of hearing include a carbon monoxide alarm with a vibrating or visual alert.
- Even if you get your boiler serviced regularly, you still need a carbon monoxide alarm. An alarm isn't a substitute for getting your appliances serviced and tested.
- If you have a combi-boiler – a boiler that can both provide hot water and central heating in the same system – you still need a carbon monoxide alarm.

What to do in an emergency

You need to act quickly if you smell gas or suspect there's a gas or carbon monoxide leak.

- Get fresh air – open all the doors and windows to ventilate the area.
- If you know where it is, shut off the gas supply at the meter control valve.
- Don't use electrical switches – for example, don't turn on the lights – as this can ignite gas.
- Extinguish all naked flames and do not smoke.
- Call the free 24-hour National Gas Emergency Helpline on **0800 111 999**.
- If you feel unwell, contact your GP or local hospital and tell them you may have been exposed to gas or carbon monoxide.

Any investigations or repairs should be carried out by a Gas Safe registered engineer.



6. Staying safe in the kitchen

There are different hazards to consider in the kitchen, and things you can do to stop accidents happening.

Avoiding accidents

To avoid any unnecessary reaching or bending, rearrange your work surfaces so the things you use most are to hand. Keep counters near the cooker clear so you can put pans down easily. When you're cooking, try to use the back rings on the cooker or hob and make sure pan handles don't stick out so you don't knock them.

Try not to carry hot liquids too far and take care when you're carrying food – use a tray or a trolley. However, don't use a trolley as a walking aid unless it has built-in brakes.

Kitchen aids and adaptations

There are many small aids and gadgets that can help you stay safe in the kitchen, such as kettle tippers and reaching tools.

If you're living with sight loss, you can get:

- labels with raised bumps to mark equipment
- talking gadgets
- special gloves
- liquid-level indicators
- oven shelf guards to prevent burns and spills.

6. Staying safe in the kitchen

You can get more information from Living Made Easy (**0300 999 0004**, livingmadeeasy.org.uk) or RNIB (**0303 123 9999**, rnib.org.uk).

If you think you'd benefit from adaptations – for example, having your kitchen cupboards or work surfaces lowered – contact your local council to ask for a free care needs assessment involving an occupational therapist.



See our factsheet **Adapting your home to stay independent** for more information.



Fire prevention

The kitchen is the highest fire risk area in the home. More than half of accidental fires are started by cooking, often when cookers and grills are left unattended.

When you're cooking, set a timer to remind you when food is ready. Keep anything flammable, such as paper, tea towels and cloths, away from the cooker and hob.

It can be annoying if your smoke alarm goes off while you're cooking, but never take the battery out. If it keeps being activated, you may need to move the alarm. Heat alarms can detect the increase in temperature from a fire and they're not sensitive to smoke, so you can install them in kitchens. They only cover a relatively small area so you may need more than one.

What to do in an emergency

If a pan catches fire, never throw water over it. Turn off the heat if you can, then leave the kitchen and close the door. Don't take any risks if there's a fire. **Get out, stay out and dial 999.**

See **chapter 3** for more fire safety advice.

6. Staying safe in the kitchen



“ I had a minor chip-pan fire. I was using a ceramic hob, which always took a long time to heat up. I became distracted by something else and forgot about it. Now I never leave pans unattended.

Look after your appliances

- A build-up of fat and grease on appliances is another major cause of fires, so keep them as clean as possible.
- Avoid storing things on top of appliances like a microwave, which can block ventilation.
- Only microwave things that say they're microwave safe. Never put metal items, tin foil, disposable plastic tubs or Styrofoam products in a microwave.
- Don't position your toaster under overhanging cupboards and keep it away from anything that could catch fire, like curtains or kitchen rolls.
- Empty out crumbs from your toaster and, if your toast gets stuck, don't try to get it out while it's plugged in – especially not with a metal knife because there may be live parts.
- Defrost your fridge and freezer at least once a year to make sure they keep working properly.

6. Staying safe in the kitchen

Help with costs

Never use a cooker to heat a room. If you're struggling to afford heating bills, check if you can get a Winter Fuel Payment and any Cold Weather Payments. You may also qualify for the Warm Home Discount Scheme – visit **gov.uk/the-warm-home-discount-scheme** or call **0800 107 8002** for information.



Call our Helpline on **0800 319 6789** for a benefits check or try our online calculator (**independentage.org/benefits-calculator**).



Our free guide **Moneywise** has more suggestions for ways to boost your income and save money.



7. Food safety

More people get food poisoning at home than anywhere else. We're more vulnerable as we get older because our immune system weakens with age.

7. Food safety

Although rare, food poisoning can be life threatening. There are some simple ways you can keep yourself safe.

Wash your hands

The single most effective way to reduce the spread of infection is to wash your hands, especially before preparing food and after handling raw food like chicken. Don't wash your hands in the washing up water – use soap and running water.

Cooking and storing food

Older people are particularly vulnerable to food poisoning caused by listeria bacteria. This may be found in chilled foods, such as pre-packed sandwiches, pâté, soft cheeses like brie or feta, cooked sliced meat and poultry, and smoked salmon.

You should eat these foods by their use-by dates, even if they look and smell okay. Don't be tempted to keep them longer to save money. Any food can contain germs that you can't see, smell or taste.

When you're cooking, make sure food is cooked all the way through. If you use a microwave, stir or turn the food halfway through its cooking time so that it cooks evenly. Use refrigerated leftovers within two days and don't reheat food more than once.

Keep your fridge below 5°C (41°F). Raw meat, fish or poultry should be stored at the bottom, below ready-to-eat food such as salad. Don't put open tins in the fridge – transfer the contents to a clean container and cover. Keep an eye on labels and throw out any food that's past its use-by date.

Other tips

- Make sure food surfaces are clean before and after you prepare food.
- Use a separate chopping board and knife for raw food such as meat – and wash them thoroughly afterwards.
- Wash fruit and vegetables under cold running water.
- Don't wash raw meat before cooking it as this can spread bacteria to other food.

You can find more food hygiene information on the NHS website ([nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well/how-to-prepare-and-cook-food-safely](https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well/how-to-prepare-and-cook-food-safely)).

7. Food safety



What to do if you get food poisoning

Food poisoning can usually be treated at home. Rest as much as possible and drink plenty of water to stay hydrated. When you feel up to it, eat plain food such as rice, toast and bananas.

If your symptoms are severe or last longer than a few days, contact your GP.



8. Water safety

To avoid flooding and hot water burns, it's important to always use water safely.

8. Water safety

Indoor flooding

A bath or washbasin can quickly overflow if you leave it unattended. You can get devices that stop a bath or washbasin overflowing or sound a warning alarm if you've forgotten to turn the taps off. You might be able to get a flood detector, which can also alert you to burst pipes and leaks, as part of a telecare package (see **chapter 1**).

Make sure you know where your mains water stop tap (stopcock) is and how to use it. Keep it clear so you can get to it easily in an emergency.

Avoiding scalds

A scald may be caused by steam or hot water and the effects can be painful and long lasting. It's important to take care. You may not be able to tell how hot water is until you've been injured.

Water in your hot tank is usually stored at 60°C (140°F) to kill bacteria. At this temperature it can burn, so it needs to be cooled before use.

When you're running a bath, always run the cold water before the hot.

A thermostatic mixing valve (TMV) accurately controls the temperature of water and can reduce the risk of scalding. You can fit TMVs to the hot and cold pipework near your washbasin or bath – there is a small cost. Contact Trustmark (**0333 555 1234**, trustmark.org.uk/find-a-tradesman) or Buy With Confidence (**01392 383430**, buywithconfidence.gov.uk) to find a reliable tradesperson. Or ask your friends and neighbours for recommendations.

Hot water bottles

A hot water bottle can be a good way to keep warm but old or cheap ones can split easily. Check the bottle and stopper regularly for signs of wear and tear. Avoid using hot water bottles that are more than three years old. Many water bottles now carry a daisy symbol in the funnel with the year of manufacture in the centre of the flower.



Remember

Never use a hot water bottle and an electric blanket at the same time.

8. Water safety

When you're filling your hot water bottle, allow the water to cool slightly. Don't use boiling water or water from the hot tap because this can cause the rubber to wear away. Take care when you're filling it – it may help to cover the hot water bottle with a towel to avoid burns. Only fill it two-thirds and expel the air. Empty the hot water bottle when you're not using it.

What to do in an emergency

If it's not serious, you may be able to treat a burn or scald at home. Burns and scalds are treated in the same way.

- Get away from the heat source to stop the burning.
- Keep the area under cool or lukewarm running water for 20 minutes.
- Don't use ice or iced water or any creams or greasy substances, like butter.

If you need advice about a burn or a scald, you can call NHS 111 or contact your GP. You can also speak to a pharmacist.



9. Managing your medication

If you take several different medications, it's important to manage them properly.

9. Managing your medication

Write a list of all your current medications, including any vitamins or supplements, and take it with you to any healthcare appointments. You should also make a note of any allergies or intolerances.

If you're prescribed a new medication, ask your GP or pharmacist about how to take them – see **page 61** for a list of questions. Be aware that some side effects or taking lots of different types of medication can increase your risk of falls (see **chapter 2**).

Read the written information that comes with your medication and keep it in a safe place for future reference. You can also find information about your medication on the electronic Medicines Compendium (eMC) at **[medicines.org.uk/emc](https://www.medicines.org.uk/emc)**.



Good to know

You might want to consider the Message in a Bottle scheme. This is where you keep your personal and medical details in a recognisable plastic bottle in the fridge, so it can easily be found by emergency services if there's an emergency.

For more information, visit **[peoplefirstinfo.org.uk/staying-safe/safety-in-the-home/message-in-a-bottle-scheme](https://www.peoplefirstinfo.org.uk/staying-safe/safety-in-the-home/message-in-a-bottle-scheme)**.

Make a plan

If you're taking lots of different medicines, consider writing a plan to keep track of:

- what each one is for
- when you need to take it
- the dose or amount you need to take
- any instructions
- when you need to re-order.

You could also do something as simple as setting alarms on your phone to remind you.

Make sure you always have enough medication, especially for weekends or holidays. If you get regular repeat prescriptions, ask your GP or pharmacist if they offer an Electronic Prescription Service (EPS). This allows you to choose where to pick up your prescription so you can avoid unnecessary trips to your GP. You can also have your medication delivered to you.

9. Managing your medication

Taking multiple medicines at different times of the day can get confusing. Pill organisers or boxes can help ensure you take your medication at the right time. They have separate compartments for days of the week and times of day. Your local pharmacy may be able to help by providing medication in a Dosette box or blister pack. Ask your pharmacist for more information.

There are telecare devices that can remind you when to take your medication and dispense the right dose. Some can alert a help centre if you forget to take your medication. You can buy telecare privately or contact your local council and ask for a care needs assessment.



See our factsheet **Technology to help you at home** for more information.

Your GP should review your medication regularly. If you've made a plan, remember to update it if anything changes.

Getting help

If you're unsure about a medication you're taking or you've got any questions, your pharmacist can advise you – you don't need an appointment – or speak to your GP. They can also help if you have any difficulties taking your medication – for example, if you find it hard to swallow. Don't crush pills, open capsules, change or stop taking your medication without getting advice.

If you're taking more than one medicine and you have a long-term condition, you may be able to get a free medicines use review with your pharmacist. They'll discuss all your medication with you and, if appropriate, send feedback to your GP, who can take any necessary action. For certain conditions, they may be able to help you through the free New Medicine Service.



See our guide **Living well with long-term health conditions** for details.

Don't use any medication after the expiry date and never take medication that has been prescribed for someone else. Take any unused medication to a pharmacist for safe disposal.

9. Managing your medication



“ You go into a little cubicle, and they ask how you’re coping with the medicines. Sometimes you realise that maybe you’re not taking them quite correctly – like taking it with water, not a hot drink, and all these little things that you may have known but forgotten. If you have the review, they refresh things for you. It’s good to have.

Here's a checklist of questions to ask your GP or pharmacist:

What is this medication for?

How long do I need to take it?

How should I store it?

Are there any side effects?

Should I avoid taking it with certain things, like food or alcohol?

What should I do if I miss a dose?

Is it okay to take other medicines with it – for example, painkillers, indigestion tablets or vitamin supplements?

Who should I speak to if there's a problem?

How often should my medication be reviewed?

Who do I speak to if I want to stop taking a medicine?



Michelle's story

I have rheumatoid arthritis and osteoarthritis, and I've lost strength in my muscles. On my birthday last year, I was standing in my bath, having a shower. I usually put the plug in and use the shower water to flush the loo. On this occasion I decided not to, and this may have saved me from drowning.

I had forgotten to put the bathmat on the floor, so when I went to step out of the shower I slipped and fell back into the bath. Instead of a shower curtain I have a big screen made of glass. I grabbed the screen as I fell, and it came away from its hinges and landed on top of me.

I panicked. For two hours I was stuck in the bath and didn't have the strength to lift myself up. If you're trying to stand and haven't got any strength in your thigh muscles, you're done for. I was shouting at myself to get a grip.

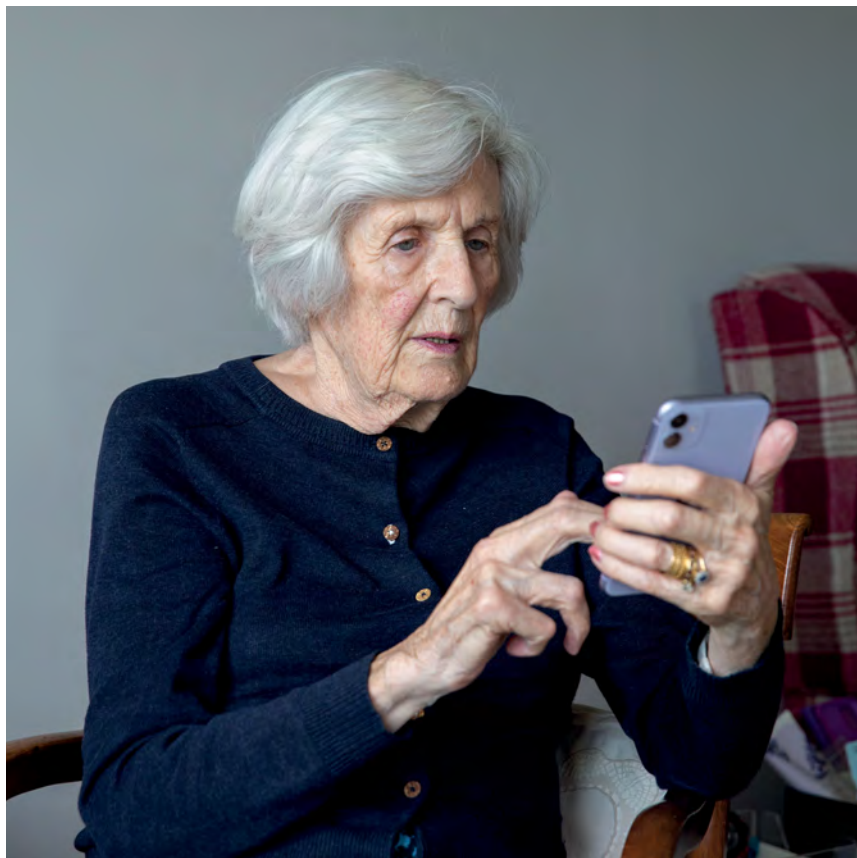
I wanted to stop myself panicking and drifting off. I knew my neighbours couldn't hear me scream. Finally, using my feet, I managed to get the shower screen away from me. I lifted myself out of the bath and levered myself up using the sink.

I was deeply shocked, but the incident showed me how important personal safety is. Now I always make sure the bathmat is in place.

I have a mobile phone with me wherever I am in the house so I can call people if I'm in distress. After the accident, I rented a personal alarm and had a coded key safe fitted outside my house so that trusted people can enter if I'm unable to walk.

I didn't want my fall to affect my confidence, so I asked an occupational therapist to come round to assess my home. I would advise anyone concerned about falling to ask for help.

“ I was deeply shocked, but the incident showed me how important personal safety is. ”



“ I have a mobile phone with me wherever I am in the house so I can call people if I’m in distress.

About Independent Age

At Independent Age, we want more people in the UK to live a happy, connected and purposeful later life. That's why we support people aged over 65 to get involved in things they enjoy. We also campaign and give advice on the issues that matter most: health and care, money and housing.

For information or advice – we can arrange a free, impartial chat with an adviser – call us on freephone **0800 319 6789** (Monday to Friday, 8.30am to 5.30pm) or email us at **advice@independentage.org**.

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