



Illinois Extension

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS URBANA-CHAMPAIGN



Keys to Embracing Aging Practice Being Safe

Practicing safety is important because it helps keep you out of harm's way. Over the course of your life you learn and practice safety, such as looking both ways before crossing the street, wearing a seatbelt, or locking your doors when away or at night. Keys to safe living include: simple lifestyle changes, recognizing where most hazards can be found, and how danger or injuries can occur when participating in different activities.

Safety across the lifespan includes a multitude of realms. The following safety tips are just a few that reflect various life domains: home, transportation, health, recreation, and emergency preparedness.

Home Safety

Home is often a place that represents security and comfort. There is no place more important to keep safe than your home. The Underwriters Laboratories (UL) recommend the following home safety tips:

- **Make your house number visible.** In case of an emergency, a house number that is easy to find and read from the street helps emergency personnel find the correct home.
- **Lock doors and windows.** Install high quality locks on both your doors and windows.
- **Sound the alarm.** Install smoke detectors on every floor of your home and carbon monoxide detectors near sleeping areas. If already installed, test them. Replace the batteries every daylight-saving time change.
- **Avoid overload.** Check for overloaded extension cords — usage should not exceed the recommended wattage.
- **Watch cord placement.** Extension cords should not be placed under rugs or heavy furniture, tacked up, or coiled while in use.
- **Secure furniture.** If young children are in the home, bookshelves and other furniture should be firmly secured with wall brackets to prevent tipping.
- **Paint safe.** Check walls for loose paint. If repainting, do so in a well-ventilated area and consider using paint free of volatile organic compounds (VOCs).
- **Childproof.** There are many things to think about when childproofing a home. Areas of particular danger include outlets, appliances, electronics, stairs, and windows.
- **Get grounded.** All major appliances should be grounded. Check your ground fault circuit interrupters regularly.
- **Plan your escape.** Practice a fire escape plan with your family; identify two exits for every room and what to do with young children.
- **Keep extinguishers handy.** Place all-purpose fire extinguishers in key locations in your home — the kitchen, bedroom, and basement. Check expiration dates regularly and know how to use them safely.

- **Create a safe exit.** In addition to alarms and extinguishers, consider an escape ladder if your home has two floors. Keep emergency numbers and contacts readily available by the phone.
- **Unplug appliances.** Unplug appliances and electronics when not in use and store them out of reach.
- **Give your air heater some space.** All air heaters should be placed at least 3 feet from beds, curtains, or anything flammable.
- **Go new in the nursery.** Check that all painted cribs, bassinets, and high chairs were made after 1978 to avoid potential lead paint poisoning. Follow all safety recommendations on furniture, furnishing covers, and blankets.
- **Cool your jets.** Set your water heater below 120° F to avoid potential burns and to save energy.
- **Put away medications.** Take medications and medical supplies out of your purse, pockets, and drawers, and put them in a cabinet with a child safety lock.

Motor Vehicle Safety

Vehicle crashes are the leading cause of unintentional injuries and death for people between the ages of 1 and 33. The National Safety Council (2012) recommends several ways to reduce your likelihood of getting into an accident and staying alive if you do:

- **Wear seat belts.** Keep yourself and family safe by always buckling up.
- **Avoid distractions.** Distracted driving is a problem on the roadways. Eating, putting on makeup, getting dressed, and fidgeting with children or pets are examples of various distractions that take your eyes and mind off the road.
- **Stay off cell phones.** An increasing amount of accidents are involving cell phone use. Talking on a cell phone while driving makes you four times more likely to crash, and texting while driving increases your chance of crashing by up to 8 to 23 times.
- **Keep infants and children safe.** Motor vehicle accidents are the number one cause of death for children ages 1 to 12. The best way to protect them is to place all children in age- and size-appropriate car seats and booster seats and to know how to properly use the seat to reduce serious and fatal injuries. Car and booster seats should be used every time a child is in a car. Children should sit in the back seat at least through the age of 12.
- **Keep teens safe.** Motor vehicle crashes are the number one cause of death for teens. Proper parental or guardian guidance in the learning to drive process is influential in a teen's ability to become a safe, responsible driver. This includes modeling non-distracted driving and safety belt use.
- **Keep older adults safe.** Over the next 20 years, the number of older drivers will increase 70 percent. The crash rates for drivers age 65 and older are higher than any age group except teens. Resources are available to help keep drivers safe, including self-assessment tools, education, driver refresher courses, and public transportation. Older drivers also need to be aware of seatbelt safety, medication side effects and interactions, planning trips during low traffic times, driving a car that best fits their needs, and the newest highway laws and vehicle changes.
- **Be aware of your surroundings.** Children are killed in and around vehicles each year, and all are preventable. Driveway back-overs and hot car deaths can easily be prevented by never leaving a child in or around a vehicle unattended. Be especially vigilant during hectic times, schedule changes, and holidays, because these busy times can often result in tragedy. Know where you parked your car, have your keys ready before walking to your car, and check in and around a car before getting in. Once in a car, lock the doors.
- **Don't drive impaired.** Impaired driving from drinking and/or drugs puts everyone on the road in danger and is a serious threat to communities throughout the nation. To prevent impaired driving, call a friend or taxi, designate someone in the group to drive who has not been drinking, and don't let your friends drive drunk.

- **Be a defensive driver.** Speeding, frequent and unnecessary lane changes, tailgating, and running red or yellow lights are examples of aggressive driving that result in putting yourself, family, and other drivers in danger. Instead, practice defensive driving techniques to save lives, time, and money.

- **Keep the vehicle well maintained.** Having your vehicle serviced regularly reduces mechanical problems and break-downs. Along with regular oil changes, ensure windshield wipers are in good working order and fill the spare tire with air.

Health Safety

Good health leads to happiness, independence, satisfaction, and fulfillment in life. The following are just a few tips that promote health safety, according to the National Council on Safety.

- **Get trained in first aid, CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation), and AED (automated external defibrillator).** Ideally, at least one person in each household should have these lifesaving skills. Seventy-five percent of out-of-hospital cardiac arrests occur at home, and 25 percent of hospital emergency room visits could be eliminated if someone knew first aid.
- **Visit the dentist.** By adopting lifelong healthy oral habits at home, making smart choices about diet and lifestyle, and seeking regular dental care, you not only help your teeth last a lifetime, but you contribute to overall health because there is a connection between a healthy body and a healthy mouth. Cavities are still the most prevalent chronic disease of childhood.
- **Visit the doctor.** Annual exams and checkups help keep children healthy and make it easier for you to stay on top of your health. During children's visits, health-care providers will give any vaccines that are due, check your child's growth and development, and test vision and hearing. Children should get all of the recommended doses of vaccines to be completely immunized against a disease. Teens are able to start taking some responsibility for their own health.

Teens should feel comfortable talking to their healthcare provider about health and emotional concerns, such as physical development or sexual health. As adults, regular checkups are important to help with health maintenance. With age, more frequent checkups and procedures are common for preventative measures, such as mammograms, prostate exams, and colonoscopies.

- **Understand how to use and dispose of your medications.** Talk to your healthcare provider(s) about all the medications you take, including over-the-counter and herbal medicines, and discuss side-effects and possible medication interactions. Before taking a pill or giving medication to children, read the label and take it exactly as prescribed in terms of dosage, timing, and whether or not it should be taken with food/ drink or not. Don't use medicines after their expiration date, and properly dispose of any unused or expired medications.

- **Prevent unintentional medication overdose.** Never take more than is prescribed. If you still have pain, call your physician to discuss your options. Refill pain medication only if you really need it and not until your current prescription is almost empty. Don't mix medications without consulting a health-care provider, and don't mix medication with alcohol or sedatives.

- **Protect against poisoning.** Unintentional poisoning includes the unsupervised ingestion of drugs or chemicals, overdoses (the excessive use of a drug), and exposure to environmental substances. The most common poisons include prescription and over-the-counter medications, cleaning products, and personal care products. Children are at the greatest risk of poisoning as the result of eating or swallowing over-the-counter and prescription medicines when an adult is not watching. Avoid leaving medication unattended on countertops and tables, loose in purses, or on the floor. Put the poison control number, 1-800-222-1222, on or near every home telephone and save it on your cell phone.

• **Prevent falls.** Falls are one of the leading causes of unintentional injuries in the United States. Falls cause injury, diminish independence, and can even lead to death. Adults age 65 years and older are more susceptible to falling. Having vision and medication checked regularly, maintaining a clutter-free and safe home environment, and physical activity can lower the risk and the fear of falling. Supervise young children at all times around fall hazards, such as stairs and playground equipment, whether you're at home or out to play to keep them safe and to help them prevent falls.

• **Practice food safety.** Wash your hands. Know the safe minimum cooking temperatures for meat, fish, and poultry. Properly use and wash cutting boards. Wash all fruits and vegetables. Know how to properly store leftovers.

• **Practice safe sex.** Sexual health is a state of physical, emotional, mental, and social well-being in relation to sexuality — it is important no matter how old you are. As part of their education, children — once they reach an appropriate age — need to learn about sex and sexuality from reliable sources so they better understand male and female bodies and how they work. Adolescence education, from a reliable source should teach about human sexual development, reproduction, types of relationships, healthy versus unhealthy relationships, sexual behavior, and how to prevent pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Adults, even those past the age of bearing children, also need to be aware of sexual health and STIs so they practice healthy behaviors.

Recreational Safety

The National Council on Safety reports that recreation-related injuries affect people of all ages and account for many injury-related emergency department visits.

- **Avoid injury while exercising.** When first starting an exercise program, begin slowly with low-intensity exercises. Stretch and warm up with low-intensity exercises at the beginning of each exercise session.

Drink water before, during, and after you exercise. Wait at least 2 hours after eating a large meal before doing strenuous exercise. Wear appropriate shoes for your activity and comfortable clothing that allows you to move freely but won't catch on objects. When outdoors, pay attention to your surroundings — consider possible traffic hazards, the weather, uneven walking surfaces, and strangers.

- **Children and exercise.** Children should wear protective gear during sports and recreation. For example, when in-line skating, use wrist guards, knee and elbow pads, and a helmet.
- **Older adults and exercise.** Check with a health-care provider before beginning an exercise program. Start out slowly. Be cautious of surgeries, such as hip replacements, and follow precautions for any health issue you may have. Perform the exercise safely and within the limits of your abilities.

• **Learn how to swim.** While swimming does not make drowning impossible, it can make it less likely to happen.

• **Prevent dog bites.** Teach children basic safety around dogs and help them be comfortable instead of afraid of dogs. Do not approach an unfamiliar dog. If approached yourself, stand still instead of running and screaming. If you are knocked over by a dog, roll into a ball and lie still. Avoid eye contact. Do not disturb a dog that is sleeping, eating, or caring for puppies. Do not pet or approach a dog without allowing it to see or sniff you first. If a dog is with his or her owner, ask before you pet the dog. Report stray dogs or dogs displaying unusual behavior. Immediately report any bite to a medical health provider.

• **Prevent playground injuries.** Falls on the playground are a common cause of injury. The surfaces under playground equipment should be safe, soft, and well-maintained (such as wood chips or sand, not dirt or grass).

- **Travel safely.** Traveling can be fun and exciting, but unassuming tourists may make easy targets. General safety suggestions include: Don't share your travel plans on social media or to people you don't know well. Highlighting that you are going to be gone can increase the risk of break-ins and robberies. Do let a trusted neighbor know, so that an eye can be kept on the house. If you're driving, know your route. Pack a map or GPS and be familiar with places to stop for food, drink, and gas. At the airport, keep your ticket, ID, and passport (if needed) with you at all times. Watch for your suitcase as it appears on the carousel upon landing.

- **Hotel safety.** If possible, choose accommodation that has unmarked "swipe cards" rather than numbered keys for each room. If you lose your swipe card or if it is stolen, the thief won't know which room to rob. Take note of emergency exits, stairwells, fire escapes, and emergency plans. Always lock your hotel door, including the deadbolt or chain. If arranging to meet people you've never met before (such as business associates), wait for them in the lobby. Don't ask them to come up to your room. Ask a hotel concierge about safe versus unsafe local areas.

- **Street smarts.** Limit your night travel, especially if the territory is unfamiliar and known to be dangerous. If you are overseas, always keep your passport with you (on a safety belt, under your clothes), but also make a photocopy of your passport and all other documents; keep those copies in a safe place. Use ATMs during the day when there are people around. Try to rely more on credit cards than cash. Even if you're not sure where you're going, walk like you've got a purpose. Be discreet when map reading and pay attention to your surroundings and the people around you.

Emergency Preparedness

Natural disasters, fires, and other catastrophic events can disrupt your home, work, and community with little to no warning. It is important to identify and learn about potential hazards common to your area. It is also important to make and share a plan to help prevent confusion and worry in the face of an emergency. Depending on the disaster, help may not always be there or be able to get to you quickly due to the severity of the disaster, blocked roads, or other barriers. According to the National Safety Council:

- **Determine the safest course of action for you and your family for each hazard.** In some situations, it may be better to stay where you are, also called sheltering in place. This would be necessary during a tornado or hazardous chemical release, for example. Sometimes, evacuation (leaving an area to escape danger) is the safer course of action in situations such as a fire or hurricane.
- **Stay informed.** Know how your community alerts citizens in an emergency. It may be an emergency broadcast on the radio or television. You might hear a special siren, or get a telephone call, or emergency workers may go door-to-door. If available, sign up for your community's emergency text or email alert system.
- **Plan for your family's comfort during disasters.** Utility outages are common during severe weather and other emergencies. Prepare a kit that can meet your household's basic needs (food, water, etc.) for 72 hours. You should also keep a kit in the car.
- **Practice what to do in an emergency.** Conduct regular drills by yourself and with your family for the most common hazards such as a fire, tornado, or earthquake.
- **Know how to keep in touch.** Local telephone service may be interrupted. Sometimes, it is easier to send a text message or contact a family member in another state. Each family member should know how to make contact to inform others that they are safe.

Internet Safety

Adults and children alike face several risks when they go online. Crimes and scams, such as sexual predation and identity theft, are everywhere. The National Council on Safety recommends the following tips to stay safe on the Internet:

- **Children and Internet safety.** Take an active role in protecting children from Internet predators and sexually explicit material. You can start by making yourself aware of your children's computer activities and by educating them about online risks. You can also block or monitor material with various options made available by many Internet service providers. Other ways in which you can keep your kids safe include:
 - Set and enforce rules regarding amount of time spent online, appropriate sites to visit, and games to play.
 - Make sure your kids create a screen name to protect their real identity.
 - Keep the computer in a common area, not in individual bedrooms, where you can watch and monitor its use.
 - Share an email account with your child so you can monitor messages.
 - Bookmark kids' favorite sites for easy access.
 - Spend time online together to teach your children appropriate online behavior.
 - Monitor your credit card and phone bills for unfamiliar account charges.
 - Find out what, if any, online protection is offered by your child's school, after-school center, friends' homes, or any place where kids could use a computer without your supervision.
 - Take your child seriously if he or she reports an uncomfortable online exchange.
- Look for signs that your child might have been targeted by an online predator or cyber bully. If your child is secretive, unusually quiet, or spending too much time online, ask questions and be supportive.
- Forward copies of obscene or threatening messages you or your kids get to your Internet service provider.
- Call the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children at 800-843-5678 if you're aware of the transmission, use, or viewing of child pornography online. Contact your local law enforcement agency or the FBI if your child has received child pornography via the Internet.
- **Adult Internet safety.** The Internet is used for many things including searching for information or entertainment, communicating with family and friends, referencing educational materials, and banking and e-commerce. Online activities make your life easier, but it is also a place for fraud, identity theft, invasion of privacy, and other cybercrimes. Some things to consider include:
 - **Use passwords wisely.** Ideal passwords should have a combination of at least eight upper and lowercase letters and numbers. Passwords should not use personal information such as a birth date or social security number. They should not include names of children or pets either. Passwords should be changed every 60 to 90 days and varied for different accounts. Passwords should never be stored online or in mobile devices.
 - **Protect your privacy.** Do not post information that identifies you or your family (names, addresses) or information that can be used to identify you, such as a nickname, a workplace or school, clubs or organizations to which you belong, or a favorite hangout.

- **Document storage.** Consider storing your username, personal identification numbers (PINs), and passwords in a secure location away from your computer. You could consider placing important documents in a safe location away from your residence, like a safety deposit box at a bank. A key consideration is whether your executor will have convenient access to the documents in the event of your death.
- **Protect your computer.** Shut down your computer when it's not in use. Keep antivirus and antispyware programs updated. Use firewalls to protect against hackers. Use encryption to protect personal information.
- **Smart social networking.** Don't reveal too much about your private life due to the anonymity of the Internet. Consider how your email message could be read by others. Never post anything that would cause you embarrassment or shame. Once posted, the information can be seen by anyone with a computer and an Internet connection, including family and friends, employers or potential employers, admissions officers at schools you might like to attend — even police and other law enforcement authorities.
- **Meeting someone online.** Learn as much as you can about an individual and verify that information. Don't share your address; meet instead in a public place where you arrive separately. Terminate all conversation if this is met with objections. Tell a trusted family member or friend of your plan and who you are meeting. Watch your alcohol intake and never leave a drink unattended. If you suspect you are being followed after your meeting, drive to the nearest police station or a public location for help.
- **Close unused accounts.** Permanently close any unused account, including social media networking accounts. If a loved one has died, follow the policies for survivors to delete, update, transfer, or even preserve the account.
- **Scams and cons.** Fraudulent activity can happen to anyone, regardless of age or means. Scams and cons commonly occur via telephone, mail, in person, or, increasingly, the Internet.
 - **Never give personal information,** such as your social security number or bank information, to anyone who shows up at your door or calls on the phone. If they say they are from the bank, they should have your numbers already. The only exception is if you have called an agency and you are sure you reached the right one.
 - **Be cautious of "free" deals** where you must pay for taxes or shipping and handling. As a general rule, if you are receiving something for free, the company sponsoring the gift will pay the taxes/shipping.
 - **Don't get pressured into "limited time offers."** These so-called deals usually have a catch such as a balloon interest rate, where there is zero or a low interest rate for a limited time but if the debt is not paid off by a set date the interest rate is extremely high. It is best to think about the deal and call or go back for more information. It is also good to talk about it with family and friends if you are not sure.

Conclusion

Recognizing situations that put your safety and well-being at risk and being aware of ways to prevent danger or injury when participating in different activities are key to safe living and optimal aging.

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