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Aging in Place Is Gaining Popularity Among Retirees. How to Prep Your Home

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Updated August 30, 2021 // Barrons.com

Original August 28, 2021

Even before the pandemic made some common senior living arrangements less desirable, a growing number of older Americans had been expressing a preference for remaining in their current home throughout retirement.

The reasons given for this desire to age in place are myriad, from community ties to nearby family members to tax breaks such as property-tax exemptions. And of course there is the cost: If homeowners can stay in their dwellings, it may be possible to delay or forgo moving into assisted living that could cost tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars. The 2020 Genworth Cost of Care Survey by insurance provider Genworth Financial, for instance, shows the national monthly median cost of assisted living is \$4,300.

For people near or in retirement looking to remodel, architects and designers suggest incorporating a flexible design to allow homeowners to comfortably age in place. Adding universal design elements

doesn't require a complete rehab. By incorporating universal design, retirees can plan for longevity, rather than infirmity, says Sarah Barnard of Sarah Barnard Design. "There are a lot of different ways that we can ensure our comfort and independence," she says.

Even if homeowners aren't planning a full renovation, they can easily adopt a few simple upgrades that can make it easier to age in place. Here are some tips:

Small projects. Architects and interior designers say their No. 1 suggestion is to invest in "smart lighting." Homeowners can remotely turn lights on and off, put them on a schedule, and adjust the brightness. Installing smart lighting can be as simple as buying smart light bulbs that screw into existing lamps, or smart plugs for wall sockets that can be used to control floor lamps. Smart plugs can also automate other manual objects, such as fans.

These devices don't require a hub, or smart home bridge, and for a few hundred dollars can outfit a house. Smart lights and plugs are controlled by a phone, and they can be controlled by voice if they are hooked up to smart speakers like Amazon.com's Alexa-based devices.

Lisa Cini, senior living designer and author of "Boom," a book about aging and technology, recommends upgrading technology to automate the home as much as possible, from smart lighting to smart thermostats and security systems, and have them connected to a smart speaker for voice activation.

"I don't think people really understand how valuable it is until they have it. It's like moving from an outhouse to indoor plumbing," she says, adding that homeowners should also invest in a stronger wireless network to bolster connectivity.

Another simple suggestion: Paint your home in contrasting colors to improve visual acuity, says John Gleichman, a certified specifications writer at Sheehan Nagle Hartray Architects where he vets products among other duties. Homeowners can use different color schemes to designate walls and baseboards from floors, and to highlight door trim. High-contrast area rugs can distinguish sitting areas from walkways.

Eva Moore, regional director of architecture and planning at Watermark Retirement Communities, says other simple swaps include using levers versus knobs on doors and cabinets, as knobs can be difficult for people with arthritis to twist open, and installing under-cabinet strip lighting in the kitchen to brighten work areas. In the bathroom, installing a handheld showerhead allows greater flexibility than a stationary head.

Weekend projects. Heidi Wang, partner at WJW Architects, a firm focusing on senior living and memory care architecture, says homeowners can improve kitchen cabinet

accessibility by installing aftermarket pullout or pull-down shelves to make it easier to access the entire cabinet and make it more effective storage.

Wall-mounted sinks allow clearance for knees for people who are seated, Wang says, and some solid-surface vanities have routed edges in front that can act as grab bars or towel racks. “There’s some really clever ways to disguise mobility aids,” she says, adding that the sink and floor should be contrasting colors.

Big projects. When embarking on a big project, such as remodeling a kitchen or bathroom, experts suggest looking for someone who is a certified aging in place specialist, a designation through the National Association of Home Builders, who can suggest universal designs.

Todd Wiltse, partner at WJW Architects, says these specialists can give homeowners a broad assessment of the dwelling to see what can be redesigned. Common projects include widening doorways to 34 to 36 inches, to allow for walkers or wheelchairs. Kitchen renovations include designs such as varying heights for countertops to accommodate both standing and seating.

In the bathroom, Wiltse says to add plywood behind the tub and shower tile to give grab bars greater resiliency. Adding it throughout lets homeowners put the bars where they want, or to wait to install them until later. “If that blocking, as it’s called, is not on the walls and then you suddenly need grab bars, then you have a problem,” he says.

A few ways to experiment with universal design and see what it looks like before remodeling starts, Gleichman says, is to request an accessible hotel room, which shouldn’t cost more than standard rooms. “It will allow you to experience how accessible bathrooms, kitchenettes, and work areas are laid-out—and used,” he says.

Homeowners can also get inspired by taking a virtual tour of a 3,500-square foot universal design demonstration home in Columbus, Ohio, created by the Universal Design Living Laboratory, which also incorporated energy-efficiency and other modern design elements.