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Retirement: A Place to Live, Evaluating Your Home

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Lifestyle considerations

People tend to view their home as an extension of themselves. Its location, decoration and physical state reflect the personality and values of the owner. Many of us will remain in the same home. Is your lifestyle being served with your present housing situation?

- **Are you happy and comfortable where you live now?**

As we grow older, the demands we place upon our home may change; and what are now minor annoyances may become major problems.

- **Are you friendly with your neighbors?**

The neighborhood should be a source of social and cultural activities that are of interest to you. Those living nearby should be friends and a source of support.

- **Are your children near?**

Frequent family contact is important to many people. Consider space needs for visits from children and grandchildren.

- **Is the neighborhood safe and likely to remain so?**

It is desirable to have close access to police and fire protection. If the neighborhood has changed substantially, you may have concerns for safety and security.

- **Are familiar surroundings important to you?**

For many people, it is comforting to have privacy, peace and quiet. Familiar surroundings promote a sense of independence.

- **Would you like new experiences, new friendships, a different climate?**

Severe weather may limit your ability to enjoy your activities and friends as you once did. It is possible that many of your friends and neighbors have developed a different lifestyle in a different climate.

- **Are you near stores, churches and recreation?**

You will need to decide how important it is to you to be near shopping centers and recreational activities. Religious faith is a key element in many people's lives.

- **Is good medical care available?**

Chronic illness increases dramatically with age. The location and kinds of health services should be a consideration in your housing decision.

- **Is there public transportation that you can use?**

Many older persons have been driving for years, but reports indicate that drivers age 60 and over are involved in more than their share of accidents per mile driven. Public transportation may be both safer and less costly than car ownership.

- **Would your home be suitable if anyone got sick or needed convalescent care?**

An injury, even a temporary one, can place demands on space and equipment. It may become impossible to climb stairs. The use of walkers and wheelchairs may make it impossible to clear doorways and appliances.

- **Is your home in good repair or could it easily be fixed up?**

Maintenance can become a problem. Yard work and home repairs may become harder for you and hired help can be expensive.

- **Is your home "full of memories" for you and your family?**

"Home is where the heart is." Your friends and relatives live nearby. You know this community and you're active here. This home has memories for you.

Design considerations

Most people want housing that offers them the greatest degree of personal independence that still meets their needs for safety, comfort and convenience.

More than likely, your present home will need at least minor changes in its design if it is to provide you with safe and comfortable retirement living.

- **Are the kitchen, bedroom and bathroom on the same floor, preferably at ground level in a detached home?**

With age comes decreasing energy and speed of reaction. Walking up stairs consumes three times more energy than walking on a level surface. Changing levels may produce a feeling of imbalance. If there must be more than one level, plan for a bedroom and bathroom on the first floor.

- **Do you have well lighted entrances, without steps and protected from the weather?**

Provide indoor switches and shadowless front lighting for outdoor steps. Entrance steps should be 5 feet by 5 feet for wheelchair use. Roofs above entrances should be equipped with gutters and snow guards to prevent buildup at entryway.

- **Are there sturdy handrails located on both sides of the stairwell?**

All steps should have handrailings for support. These should extend 12 inches to 18 inches beyond the top and bottom steps. Minimum recommended width of space between handrails is 3 feet to 4 feet. All risers and treads should be uniform in size. Treads for exterior steps should be broad (12 inches to 14 inches); risers should be low (5 inches to 6 inches).

- **Does the flooring have a non-slip surface?**

Falls are a major source of injury to older people. Choose a no-wax finish and clean up spills promptly.

- **Are your doors, hallways and bathrooms accessible for wheelchairs?**

All interior doors should have a free space of 30 inches. Hallways should be short, free of turns or furniture and at least 3 feet to 4 feet wide.

- **Are your bathrooms equipped with grab bars?**

These should be mounted on walls around the bathtub or in the shower. They should be nonbreakable and withstand a pull of 220 pounds. These are more visible if they contrast in color with the walls.

7. Do you rely on storage areas which are extremely high or low?

Items stored between knee and eye level are easy to see and reach. Avoid tugging on large articles or climbing for things stored high up.

- **Do you have adequate lighting for general purposes as well as close up tasks?**

Older people need more light than the young. Reading or high intensity lights may be necessary for reading, sewing and hobby work. Good lighting decreases the chance of falls.

- **Are your windows located for view, sunlight, fire escape and ease of care?**

Older people may not go out as much, especially in bad weather; a view of neighborhood activity is desirable. Living and bedroom windows that face south provide maximum winter sunshine. It should be possible to clean windows from the inside. At least one window in each room should be easily opened and large enough for easy escape in case of fire.

- **Does your heat source provide safe and even heat with low maintenance and moderate cost?**

Elderly people are sometimes unable to detect escaping gas. Many older people do not want to have to learn to use a new kind of heating or cooking fuel; open flames are dangerous for those who have grown unsteady. Many retirement housing options provide utilities as part of monthly rent.

- **Is your furniture arranged for easy movement, comfort and safe exit?**

Leave straight clear paths through rooms. Furniture should have rounded edges; drawers should have catches to prevent you from pulling them out and dropping them. Arrange furniture away from drafty doors and windows. Fire escape routes should be identified and care should be taken not to block these with large pieces of furniture.

- **Are you equipped with an emergency communications system?**

Install a bedside phone for emergency calling and another in the living area so that you won't have to run from room to room to answer. An intercom system or subscribing to a **lifeline** monitored system may be desirable.

There are no right or wrong answers to these questions. Looking at your answers may give you suggestions for making lifestyle and/or design adjustments.

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