

A HEALTHY ALTERNATIVE TO SENIOR'S HOUSING

The sedentary lifestyle of seniors living in retirement homes is making them age more quickly, according to a study published in the Canadian Journal on Aging. The report states that seniors' homes are built to keep residents safe but eliminate too many of the physical tasks of everyday life. Walking and climbing stairs have been replaced by effort-saving golf carts and elevators. Many residents do not need to cook or do housework. The effects of this inactivity are accelerated deterioration of joints and muscles and greater susceptibility to illness for those living in care facilities as opposed to caring for themselves.

"Physically challenging aspects of the environment, such as stairs, should be included in the design of living spaces for the elderly," write Kathy Shipp and Laurence Branch, the two U.S. researchers who conducted the study. "Our concern is that the current trends in design for specialized housing for the elderly ... may be over-supporting many residents."

The authors, both researchers at Duke University in North Carolina, examined the health of seniors in the U.S. and Canada. One test involved asking residents climb up and down a flight of stairs. "When confronted with this environmental demand, many of the participants commented on the fact that since moving into the retirement community they rarely had to use stairs and consequently they had noticed that negotiating stairs in other settings was increasingly difficult."

According to Health Canada, as of 2001, seniors make up 12.3% of the population. Approximately 5% of Canadians over 65 live in long-term care homes, compared with more than half of all Canadians over 80. Unfortunately most homes do not have enough staff to ensure residents are exercising on a regular basis. The options for many seniors are limited: one in five Canadian seniors live in a low-income situation. In 1998, 20% of seniors had incomes below Statistics Canada's Low Income Cut-off.

The quality of care at many facilities has suffered from decreased government funding and it is expected to get worse. By the year 2030 all the baby boomers will be 65 years or older and many of those will require extended care.

The dilemma for many seniors and their families is how to avoid the pitfalls of these facilities and remain as healthy as possible. One option, independent living, may be difficult for many seniors. There could be concerns about household accidents or a sense of isolation. Another option, living with the family, has its own set of problems despite the fact that many people do it. Canadians spent 435,172 unpaid hours per week caring for the elderly according to the 1996 Census, the latest national census produced by Statistics Canada. An extended family under one roof can create a great amount of stress especially if there are young children underfoot. Also, if basic chores are done for the senior member, they may be no more active than they would be in a care facility.

The best compromise for everyone may be a garden suite—a small, self-contained home added to the lot of an existing house. This type of separate suite allows healthy seniors to enjoy their privacy and independence and still benefit from having relatives nearby. The suite can be warm, comfortable and most of all close to assistance and family affection.

The typical design is a portable or prefabricated one-storey, one or two-bedroom unit without a basement. It is possible to lease these units and they come in a variety of styles. The Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation, the federal housing agency, has long been in favour of this type of housing. In 1989, they held a garden unit demonstration, which led to government projections of 213,000 families potentially interested in a garden suite. One warning, however: check with your local municipal government before you invest in a garden suite. Zoning bylaws may prohibit additional suites on your property. The main concerns of local government can be that the suite will be used for the non-elderly, potentially adding to already crowded street parking or school systems. The temporary nature of this type of housing helps to circumvent some zoning restrictions.

A few creative variations on the basic idea include:

- a grandchild may be able to afford a house with a grandparent's financing in exchange for a suite

- a retiree and his family may jointly purchase a property with the provision that the retiree will have a suite on the property
- a retiree can retain ownership of the property and move into a suite while the kids and grandkids use the house if they pay the property tax and utilities.

In order to maintain independent living in a garden suite, it may be necessary at some point to get some outside assistance. Preparing meals and buying groceries can be taxing chores for some seniors. Proper nutrition is crucial to the health. If the person lacks the energy to cook there are some solutions. Today there are many companies, which can provide meal services and grocery delivery. If you have teenage children they may also want to do some of these chores themselves for extra income. This type of work can teach responsibility and provide valuable experience.

Home care provided by qualified nurses may also become necessary. Local hospitals and family doctors can usually recommend qualified caregivers. Home cleaning services may also be beneficial.

Another important aspect of independent living is socializing. Aside from being involved in the family, seniors can benefit by spending time with their peers. Local community centres often have activities especially for this age group.

Technology can also make living independently much more fulfilling. With some instruction, many seniors can begin to use the Internet and e-mail. These can become a source of entertainment and a connection with the outside world.

Having an elderly family member close by can be a wonderful experience for everyone. Sons and daughters can finally get to know the parent they spent years rebelling against. Children mature by leaps and bounds by helping out and spending time getting to know their grandparents.

THE "HOME HUNTERS"

Grant & Steve Hunter

PLANNING FOR RETIREMENT

Planning for a healthy, enjoyable retirement involves more than saving money. Our homes and the communities where we choose to live also have a significant impact on our quality of life.

Change in Lifestyle

Retirement can be a radical change in lifestyle, particularly for those who have worked outside of the home. When people retire, they often find themselves spending much of their time at home. It can seem like an isolating experience, but retirement can also be a wonderful time to pursue leisure activities. During our working lives, a common complaint is the lack of free time, so plan ahead to enjoy your retirement to the fullest. If you've always wanted to see Europe or some other destination, put aside money for travelling. If you enjoy woodworking or creating stained glass, for example, you may want to get started on setting up a workshop in your garage or basement. If you've always wanted to try painting, retirement presents the perfect opportunity. You never know - you may just end up being back in business selling your handiwork!

Another way to alleviate the feeling of being isolated is to become more involved in the community. Sharing your time, gifts and talents with others by volunteering can be deeply satisfying. Look under Volunteer Services, Community Services and Social Service in your local Yellow Pages to find organizations in need of volunteers. Going back to school is another way to get involved in the community. It can help maintain mental sharpness and provide a sense of belonging and opportunities for new friendships. Other options include learning a new language, gourmet cooking or learning to play a musical instrument.

Barriers in the Home

Another important aspect to consider is how well your home will age with you. Many of us will experience impaired vision, reduced mobility or reliance on a wheelchair at some point in our lives. These physical limitations may make it difficult for people to remain at home, particularly if their home presents certain obstacles such as stairs or narrow doorways. In some cases, people are forced to leave a home in which they have invested years of memories. By purchasing a home that can age with you and/or making renovations to an existing home, you will be able to enjoy the comforts of your own home for years to come. Consider the following:

1. Are the doors wide enough to allow a wheelchair to pass through? Doorways should be a minimum of 82cm (32 inches) wide and all entries should have a flat threshold. Allow a minimum width of 92cm (36 inches) for walkways.
2. Does your home have a sunken living room? Stairs are difficult or impossible to climb in a walker or wheelchair.
3. Is there room for a wheelchair in your kitchen? The open floor space should be 1.525 metres by 1.525 metres (5 feet by 5 feet) to allow a wheelchair to easily turn 360 degrees.

Location

Where a person chooses to live can also affect how much they enjoy their retirement years. Having family close by can make it easy for retirees to socialize with children and grandchildren. Close proximity to family means that assistance is nearby when it is needed. Another important source of support and social interaction is the local community. Check into the social programs offered by community centers (and churches, if applicable). Typically, there are numerous activities for seniors such as card games, art classes and trips.

Medical and other services

Proximity to medical services is another important consideration when choosing a location in which to retire. Check into the availability of in-home (or outreach) services such as nursing care and meal delivery. Consider the distance to family doctors and hospitals.

Internet and E-mail

Age is certainly not a limitation to computer usage. Even people who think they are too old to use a computer may find themselves hooked on surfing the net and e-mailing their grandchildren after a few lessons!

The Internet has also become an increasingly important source of information. Business and government offer information online, making it easy for seniors to gather information at their fingertips. Most banks and financial institutions now offer online banking services allowing people to streamline their financial matters. Retirees can look up information about medical conditions and medications and keep informed on the latest research.

One of the best gifts children can give older parents is a computer and some lessons on how to use it. (Lessons are also available at most community centers and at organizations such as the YMCA-YWCA.) Before you know it, they'll be surfing the net and perhaps playing online card games with new friends around the world.

Advances in medicine and technology mean that people can now enjoy a healthier more active retirement than ever before. With some planning, these truly can be the best years of a person's life!

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HOME SAFETY FOR SENIORS

As the Canadian population ages, many elderly individuals are faced with the decision whether to stay in their homes or move into facilities that provide extended care. Counselors suggest that moving should be considered when seniors experience difficulty caring for themselves and experience a feeling of isolation about their situation. The reality is that many seniors do not want to leave the security of their own homes. Fortunately, there are viable options that support a safer home environment and in turn a more independent lifestyle.

Many home safety options are simple and require common sense, a few low priced materials, and a handyman to install them. Other products are high-tech and require planning, professional installation, and expensive equipment. These sophisticated products are part of the medical equipment industry, an industry sector that is rapidly expanding due to society's shift from institutional care to supported home care. Here is a list of areas of the home that may be safety hazards for aging individuals and what can be done to decrease or prevent accidents in the home.

All Areas of the House

- Falls are the most common cause of injury that requires hospitalization for the elderly.
- Keep all cords out of the way.
- Arrange furniture around extension cords.
- Ensure all runners and small rugs are slip resistant.
- One telephone, such as cordless phone, should be accessible in case of falls. Carbon monoxide poisoning is a concern for elderly individuals with low oxygen levels.
- All space heaters should be checked regularly for proper venting. Doorknobs can be difficult to operate for seniors with physical disabilities. >
- Inexpensive levered doorknobs are simple to install with a screwdriver.

Stairways

Stairways can be physically strenuous and are therefore a high-risk area for falling.

- Socks or smooth soled shoes should be avoided when walking down the stairs
- Light colored carpet and painted stair edges are recommended for visibility.
- Install night-lights and use the maximum allowable wattage in your light fixtures.

- Handrails need to be properly mounted on both sides of the stairway.
- For greater mobility, steps should be longer and shallower.
- Electric or battery powered stair lifts are available for difficult to climb stairs.
- Ramps are recommended for exterior stairs with a slight rise in elevation.
- Porch lifts are viable for higher elevations operating similar to an elevator.

Bathrooms

Bathrooms are a concern for seniors because they are required to move around and get up and down on surfaces that may be wet and slippery with hard floors underneath. Falls can be avoided by decreasing the amount of time spent standing in the shower and eliminating the need to step over the tub rim.

- Grab bars and handrails should be securely installed into wall studs.
- Plastic high-rise seats can be added to toilets.
- For added security, install seats and benches in the shower and tub.
- Motorized and manually operated bath lifts are readily available.
- Roll-in showers can be installed to accommodate wheelchairs.

Kitchens/Bedrooms/Living Rooms

The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission estimates that 70% of all people who die from clothing fires are over the age of 65.

- Wear clothes with short or close-fitting sleeves when cooking.
- Use electric blankets according to manufacturer's instructions. Added bedding on top can trap heat in and cause a fire.

Reaching for items located on high shelves is hazardous especially when using a chair.

- Some step stools are equipped with handrails and should be opened completely for full stability.

The transition from in and out of chairs and beds is often difficult for the elderly.

- Attach bed rails to sides of beds.
- Hospital beds and electric lift-up chairs, with level control, make transitions smoother.

Of special note, manufacturers suggest that interested individuals should not wait until the situation is critical to install a stair lift. Operating a stair lift requires a person to steadily press a button for the length of the staircase, and wheelchair-bound seniors, with limited strength, may have trouble transferring between chairs. Furthermore, the installation of a stair lift is up to five times less expensive than remodeling the home for specific needs, such as, the inclusion of a main floor bathroom.

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