

Home away from home

While many seniors like to be independent, they need thoughtfully designed spaces to be able to live in comfort and safety?

from Aged Care New Zealand Issue 2 2021

Creativity can be put to the test when decorating a space for senior citizens. Whether it's a single room, studio apartment, patio home or other living quarters, senior citizens have particular needs regarding their décor. While aesthetics and comfort are important, safety is paramount.

Layout

A proper room layout and furniture arrangement is crucial to a senior's wellbeing. Most nursing home rooms are modestly sized and bringing in too many personal items can make the room cluttered and dangerous.

Keep walkways wide and clear to allow ample room for walking. Older people confined to a wheelchair or those that need the assistance of a walker or cane require even broader passageways. A single-level residence on the ground floor offers an optimal abode for seniors who have difficulty climbing steps. Even a single step that transitions from a kitchen to a sunken living area can be problematic for the elderly. Install a handrail on each side of the step as a reminder that it's there as well as to aid for going up and down it.



If it is a skilled nursing facility, then there may be a certain amount of medical equipment in place. When decorating, one can't simply take it out because it is ugly. You also shouldn't attempt to hide it behind other objects, as staff may need to access it quickly in an emergency.

You may not be able to move furniture either. It is placed so that there is access to the appropriate outlets. What you can do, is take advantage of spaces that already exist, such as the bed, walls, furniture and windows. You can customise the décor to suit the individual's personality and interests just by adding a few special touches.

If it is a shared room, then the other's privacy and territory must be respected too. One person's possessions shouldn't trickle over into the other side of the room, their lamps shouldn't be pointed at the other person's bed or reading chair, and one should make sure that any items that might be offensive or disturbing to the roommate are placed so they are not easily visible from their side.

Shared rooms mean less space on either side of the divider too, so you will want to limit items that take up floor space, as well as things that are in 'elbow space' (tabletops) that they may need for other purposes, such as eating, writing, or working puzzles.

Safely

Decorating a senior citizen's residence with safety features should top the design list. Many older people don't move around as well as they did in their younger years. Remove scatter and area rugs from the floors.

Safety and ease of maintenance should be important considerations when choosing the right flooring for the elderly. For elders with an unsteady gait, a non-slip surface is a must.

- Carpeted flooring is comfortable underfoot and offers to cushion in the event of a fall but is not suitable for elders who are in a wheelchair. Do remember that carpets are also not easy to keep clean as they have to be vacuumed regularly, and they also get stained easily.
- Anti-skid vitrified or ceramic tiles are very easy to keep clean but do not offer a non-slip surface when wet.
- Especially in bathrooms, you should replace the tiles with flamed granite or a similar surface that has an even, rough texture.
- Vinyl floors are easy to maintain, and if you can add a layer of cork between you will get a cushioning effect in case of falls.

The colour of the flooring tile is also an important consideration. Whites and light colours do not show up water spills, and even a little water on the floor can cause a nasty accident.

Sofas and chairs that aren't too low, deep or plush makes it easier for seniors to sit down and get up. In addition make sure the seating has stable arms that are tall enough for them to grab onto. A reclining chair supplies a comfortable seat that an elderly person can adjust to her own personal preferences.

Substitute an upholstered ottoman for a traditional coffee table. An ottoman has no sharp edges or corners to scrape bare legs or bang your shins on and they are great for storing knitting supplies, magazines, a spare blanket and other odds and ends of clutter that make the room feel too claustrophobic.



A bed with comfort level controls allows an older couple to adjust each side of the bed to suit individual needs, such as mattress firmness and reclining positions. All items inside the wardrobe should be easily accessible; a pulldown wardrobe lift is a useful accessory if rods are too high to reach.

Decorate with dining, bedside and accent tables that have rounded corners for increased safety against sharp corners. Just aim for sleek designs that will fit well into any space and are easy to clean. Soft, woven furniture throws, lumbar pillows and dimmer switches add comfort to a senior's home.

Aesthetics

Aesthetics plays a significant role in making an older person's residence feel homey. If possible, paint the walls a warm but neutral colour – warm beige, sage green, creamy caramel – to generate a soothing ambiance. The wall colour should be a distinctly different hue than the floors so that seniors with weakening vision can readily discriminate between the two. The same principle applies to bedding; purchase contrasting bottom and top sheets for ease in differentiating between them.

Senior citizens have often collected a ton of decorative items throughout their lifetime, which can quickly lead to a cluttered environment. Display only a few favourite articles on wall shelves and group small collectibles together for display in a lighted curio cabinet.

Rather than putting all the favourite photos and knickknacks in a room at once, use very few at a time, then switch them around every so often to help the room look fresh and new. This is an especially good way to celebrate the changes of seasons.

Health

A very real consideration in an aged care environment is hygiene. If the person has any type of respiratory or contagious illness or infection, then you want to make sure all surfaces are something that can be wiped easily with a sanitising agent. This is not the best time to decorate with ornate scroll work that takes too much time to clean. Nooks, crannies, porous surfaces and linens that can't be washed in hot water may harbour dangerous bacteria and re-infect or cause illness to others.

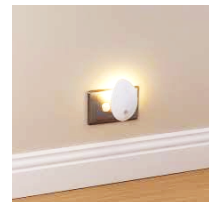
Where, dementia is a factor, one may need to avoid overloading the room, since this can add to confusion. Busy prints are not a good idea, as they can appear to 'crawl'. Choose furniture and storage containers that can be labelled, since photo labels can sometimes help the individual find items they need or want.

Lighting

As we age, our eyesight deteriorates. Lighting should be cool and bright, and white light is preferred over yellow light.

Plan to add adequate ambient lighting for safe navigation around the house, and task lighting for reading books or other hobbies.

- A night lamp is a must in the bedroom so that trips to the bathroom are not made in the dark
- Lighting and air conditioning switches can be operated using a remote.
- Staircase lighting is an important safety consideration



Open up the views

As many elderly people are restricted to a room or the indoors, large windows or balconies are a lovely way for them to keep in touch with the outdoors. They should be able to get street views and views of the garden as much as possible. Windows should only have light shades so they get their daily dose of Vitamin D without needing to get outside.

To sum up, it's important to ensure that our senior citizens can live individualised spaces with a high degree of independence and dignity. It can also serve as a reminder to them, as well as to visitors, that they are more than just another resident. They are individuals with their own ideas and likes.

