

Successful Home Safety Assessments



Laura N. Gitlin, Ph.D

As a person ages, everyday activities often become challenging. This results in a lower quality of life on many levels, from the physical to the psychological. The results of a unique home intervention study showed that individualizing home

evaluations and involving the patient in decision-making can have a dramatic positive effect on functional abilities. Philips Lifeline is pleased to present an interview with the study's principal investigator and lead author, Laura N. Gitlin, Ph.D, a research sociologist and professor in the Department of Occupational Therapy and director of the Center for Applied Research on Aging and Health at Thomas Jefferson University in Philadelphia. She has published extensively in gerontology and occupational therapy on family caregiving, dementia care, physical function, and co-authored numerous books.

1. How does a home safety assessment play into the over all health care planning for an older person and how does it help prevent falls?

An effective home safety assessment plays a critical role in identifying ways to use the environment to support continued participation in an activity and minimize the risk for falls.

As people become older and experience functional difficulties due to chronic illness or health problems, they commonly adapt by changing their behavior rather than their environment. Typically, a person will stop or decrease their participation in an activity that is becoming difficult to perform. But this can have a negative and cascading effect. Decreasing participation in a valued activity may result in less physical activity, isolation, and feeling depressed. It is also associated with the risk for falling. On the flip side, adapting strategies such as modifying the environment or energy conserving techniques such as pacing oneself or sitting instead of standing, can enable a person to continue in an activity that he/she values.

2. Your work and research on 'multi-component' home safety assessments for the elderly are very impressive. Tell us about the study and the most significant findings of your research?

We were funded by the National Institute on Aging to conduct a randomized study with 319 individuals, 70 years or older, who were living in their home or apartment in the community and reported having some difficulties with everyday activities such as bathing, dressing or preparing meals. Individuals who were randomized to receive the six month intervention, Project ABLE (Advancing Better Living for Elders), received five home visits from an occupational therapist who worked with the older adult to identify activities that were difficult to carry out and who introduced specific environmental and behavioral strategies to make difficult tasks easier. They also received one visit from a physical therapist who taught simple balance and muscle strengthening exercises, as well as safe fall recovery techniques.

Key to ABLE is that we work on those areas that older adults themselves identify as problematic and want to address. Rather than using a traditional therapeutic approach which is often prescriptive, ABLE participants were involved in identifying problem areas and evaluating different strategies with the occupational therapist that would be acceptable to them. Together we developed strategies to overcome their difficulties that included using a variety of adaptive equipment such as grab bars, seating devices, hand rails; modifying objects in the home such as removing clutter, reorganizing objects to be in easy reach; and incorporating personal energy conservation techniques such as taking rest breaks. Our collaborative approach was very important to the success of the program.

The physical therapy visit was also very critical to the success of the program. Older people are often very fearful that if they should fall they won't be able to get up or seek help. Part of the intervention included risk reduction techniques and methods on how to fall safely and how to get up after a fall. Obviously if a person is seriously injured they should stay on the ground and this is where a medical alert service is so important.

The results of this study are very important. We found that participants in the ABLE intervention reported 1) reduced functional difficulties in the home, 2) reduced home hazards, particularly in the bathroom, 3) reduced fear of falling, 4) enhanced confidence in the ability to manage day-to-day tasks, and 5) most importantly, reduced mortality risk.

continued on the other side...

Home Assessment Tools and Resources

Home Enabler

For use by OTs to evaluate functional limitations of person, mobility aid use, and environmental barriers from which to make home modification recommendations. www.enabler.nu

Home Environmental Assessment Protocol (for Dementia)

For use in research or clinical purposes. Can be administered by healthcare professionals or researchers.

Room-by-room observation of potential hazards specific to individuals with dementia and adaptations that support daily functioning.

Disability and Rehabilitation, 24, 59-71. Gitlin, et al., (2002). Tool available at: www.jefferson.edu/jchp/carah after Oct 1, 2007.

Center for Healthy Aging, National Council on Aging:

Helpful home safety checklists for consumers and health professionals
www.healthyagingprograms.org/content.asp?sectionid=69
(Follow link for Home Safety Checklist)

Check For Safety: A Home Fall Prevention Checklist for Older Adults

Consumer-oriented checklists to enhance home safety and reduce the risk of falls.
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2005)

http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/pub-res/toolkit/Falls_ToolKit/Offset/English/booklet_Eng_offset.pdf

Taking Action for Falls Prevention: A Home Environmental Assessment for service providers

Room-by-room assessment of potential environmental hazards that pose risk for a fall. Falls Prevention Center of Excellence.

<http://www.stopfalls.org/files/ProgramExpansion-HomeAssessmentTool.pdf>

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3. Personalized Response: Within seconds, a **Lifeline Response Associate** accesses your profile and quickly assesses the situation.

4. Closed Loop: The Associate then contacts a neighbor, loved one or emergency services based on your specific request. The Lifeline Response Associate will follow up to ensure that help arrived.

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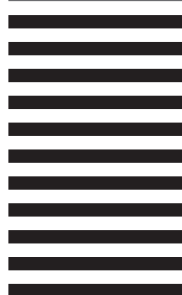
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FALL 2007

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- 2. Where to Obtain Home Safety Assessment Tools and Resources

Successful Home Safety Assessments

continued from other side...

ABLE participants had a significant survivorship benefit that lasted two years from the time of entering the study.

3. What modifications to the home safety assessment would you recommend to healthcare professionals who conduct these assessments as part of their treatment plan?

I would say observe a person within the home environment in order to consider the person's actual performance, preferred ways of carrying out every day tasks and personal safety goals. We know now that for an assessment to be successful we have to include a person's own goals and functional difficulties and make our recommendations without infringing on that person's personal choices and goal for autonomy.

4. When the patient is going directly home from the hospital, what is the best way for

a hospital discharge planner to communicate the importance of home safety assessment to family members?

We recommend that families be provided a home safety checklist and be given a referral to an occupational therapist. (see sidebar for resources)

5. At what stage in the aging process do you recommend a home safety assessment be done?

Anyone who is having difficulty at home such as getting into/out of the tub, getting in/out of bed, climbing stairs, going outside, or buttoning a shirt – as small as it might seem – should consider the role of the environment in supporting their efforts to carry out the activity safely and efficiently. If these functional difficulties are brought to the attention of a doctor, he/she could refer the person to receive occupational or physical therapy in the home. Our

research, as well as others, suggests that this can prevent a lot of problems down the road.

6. What is the role of medical alert service in a home safety assessment?

The medical alert system is important because it can save a life. In addition there is a great psychological benefit because it provides a valuable security measure, particularly for the person who lives alone or in an isolated area. If a person knows that they have the ability to contact someone much of their concern and fear of falling can be alleviated.

Fear of falling is very important to address. It represents a real geriatric syndrome with pernicious psychological and physical consequences that affects people's ability to engage in activities. Having a fear of falling can lead to physical decline, depression and social isolation. A medical alert service can help overcome fear of falling for many people.

Disclaimer: This newsletter does not constitute medical advice. The views and the opinions expressed herein are solely those of the subject and are not necessarily representative of the views of Philips Lifeline.

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