

Senior SafetyAdvice

A free gift from Esther Kane, CAPS, C.D.S.

The Caregiver's Compass Quick-Start Checklist

Four areas to check first when you're caring for someone you love

Welcome, caregiver.

When you're caring for someone, it's hard to know where to start. This checklist gives you a simple place to begin. It covers the four areas I saw cause the most trouble in my 12+ years as an occupational therapist working with older adults:

1. Home safety **2.** Medications **3.** Hydration and nutrition **4.** Your own well-being

You don't need to finish it in one day. Walk through one section at a time. Check off what's already done, and circle anything that needs attention. Small fixes made today can prevent a crisis tomorrow.

How to use this checklist

- ☐ Print a copy and keep it on the fridge or in your caregiving binder.
- ☐ Pick one section this week. Walk through it with your loved one if you can.
- ☐ Write your top 3 to-dos on the last page.
- ☐ Come back in 3 months, or any time there's a fall, hospital stay, or change in health.

Important: This checklist is for general education only and is not medical advice. It does not replace a personal assessment by a doctor, pharmacist, occupational therapist, or other qualified professional. If you notice sudden changes in health, confusion, or a fall with injury, contact a healthcare provider right away. In an emergency, call 911.

Section 1: Home Safety

Most falls happen at home. Walk through each room and look for these.

Floors and walkways

- ☐ Throw rugs are removed or secured with non-slip backing.
- ☐ Cords, clutter, and pet bowls are out of walking paths.
- ☐ Paths from bed to bathroom are clear and at least 3 feet wide where possible.
- ☐ Steps and thresholds are easy to see (contrasting tape can help).

Lighting

- ☐ Night lights light the way from the bedroom to the bathroom.
- ☐ Light switches are at the top and bottom of every stairway.
- ☐ A lamp or touch light is within reach of the bed.

Bathroom

- ☐ Grab bars are installed by the toilet and in the tub or shower (towel bars are not grab bars).
- ☐ A non-slip mat or strips are in the tub or shower.
- ☐ A shower chair or tub bench is used if standing is tiring or unsteady.
- ☐ A raised toilet seat or toilet safety frame is in place if getting up is hard.

Stairs, entries, and emergencies

- ☐ Sturdy handrails are on both sides of all stairs.
- ☐ Smoke and carbon monoxide alarms are working (test them monthly).
- ☐ Your loved one can call for help from any room (phone, medical alert, or smart speaker).
- ☐ Emergency numbers are posted in large print near the phone.

Section 2: Medications

Medication mix-ups are common and often preventable.

Keep an up-to-date list

- ☐ There is one written list of every medicine, including vitamins, supplements, and over-the-counter products.
- ☐ The list shows the dose, the time taken, the reason, and who prescribed it.
- ☐ Copies are kept in a wallet or purse, on the fridge, and with a family member.
- ☐ The list is updated after every doctor visit or hospital stay.

Take them safely

- ☐ A weekly pill organizer or automatic dispenser is used if doses are missed or doubled.
- ☐ Medicines are stored in a cool, dry place with good light for reading labels.
- ☐ Expired or unused medicines are safely disposed of (ask your pharmacy about take-back options).
- ☐ Reminders are set up with alarms, a phone app, or a smart speaker.

Ask the experts

- ☐ All prescriptions are filled at one pharmacy when possible, so interactions can be caught.
- ☐ A "brown bag" review has been done: bring every medicine to the doctor or pharmacist once a year.
- ☐ You've asked whether any medicine can cause dizziness, drowsiness, or falls.
- ☐ You know what side effects to watch for and when to call the doctor.

OT tip: Dizziness when standing up is a common fall trigger. Encourage your loved one to sit on the edge of the bed for a moment before getting up.

Section 3: Hydration and Nutrition

Older adults often feel less thirsty, even when their bodies need fluids.

Everyday hydration

- ☐ A water glass or bottle is always within easy reach.
- ☐ Drinks are offered throughout the day, not just at meals.
- ☐ Water-rich foods are included, like soup, fruit, yogurt, and smoothies.
- ☐ You've asked the doctor how much fluid is right for your loved one (some conditions require limits).

Watch for warning signs

- ☐ Dark urine or going to the bathroom much less often
- ☐ Dry mouth, headache, or feeling dizzy or tired
- ☐ New confusion or changes in behavior (call the doctor, as this can signal dehydration or infection)
- ☐ Extra risk during hot weather, illness, vomiting, or diarrhea

Meals made easier

- ☐ Kitchen items used every day are stored between hip and shoulder height.
- ☐ There are easy, healthy options on hand for low-energy days.
- ☐ You've noticed any weight loss, skipped meals, or trouble chewing or swallowing and mentioned it to the doctor.
- ☐ Meals are shared when possible, since people often eat better with company.

Section 4: Caring for Yourself

You can't pour from an empty cup. Your well-being matters too.

- ☐ I get some time each week that is just for me.
- ☐ I have at least one person I can call when I need to talk.
- ☐ I know who could step in if I got sick or needed a break (respite care).
- ☐ I'm keeping up with my own doctor visits and medicines.
- ☐ I've let go of at least one thing I can't control this week.
- ☐ I've looked into local support, such as my Area Agency on Aging or a caregiver support group.

Remember: You can't control every outcome. You *can* control your next step, how you respond, and how you care for yourself along the way.

My Top 3 To-Dos

From the items you circled, pick the three that matter most right now.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Want to go deeper?

Find step-by-step workbooks, checklists, and free articles on home safety and caregiving at **SeniorSafetyAdvice.com**. For more support on the emotional side of caregiving, visit **TheStoicCaregiver.com**.