

Lighting an Important Consideration for Senior Citizens' Homes

Like so many other things that are changing to meet the needs of an aging society, home design has also become a major focus. Senior citizens have a multitude of needs to make their homes more livable - like good light - and to allow them to stay in their homes longer, rather than move to community housing. This need has fostered several organizations that focus on making private homes and community homes more senior friendly.

"Older people require three times the amount of light to see as well as younger people, but are more sensitive to glare," writes one of the experts on design for the elderly, Margaret P. Calkins, Ph.D.

"People with dementia have impaired contrast perception, which makes it harder to see the edges of objects, particularly when the foreground (object) and background are similar color and value," she writes in a report called "Using Color as a Therapeutic Tool."

She says, "This is particularly important when designing to support functional independence.

- Chair seats should contrast with the floor so people can see where the edge of the chair is.
- Sink basins should contrast with the surrounding counter/vanity top.
- Toilets (or toilet seats) should contrast with both the floor and surrounding walls to make them more visible.
- Table settings should provide high contrast between the plates (usually white or pale colored) and the table/tablecloth/placemat (dark color).
- Colors that are a mix of hues from the opposite side of the color wheel (such as red and green, or yellow and blue) will appear particularly muddy, and thus be less attractive, to older individuals whose lens is yellowed.

According to the Center of Design For An Aging Society in Portland, Oregon, older people need more light for both vision and maintaining health.

As people age the eye lenses thicken and the pupils shrink. This causes eyes of senior citizens to adapt more slowly to changing light conditions and increases the need for more light, and not just for vision and safety.

Many senior citizens don't get outside enough, so there are many reasons to consider bringing more natural light in. Seniors need vitamin D for calcium to be absorbed by the body to strengthen teeth, bones and tissue to maintain a healthy skeleton throughout life. Two sources of vitamin D are diet and sunlight.

In healthy human bodies, 80 percent of vitamin D is produced in the skin when it is exposed to natural light.

A vitamin D deficiency can contribute to the brittle-bone disease osteoporosis, a major issue of aging, particularly for women.

And the benefits of having abundant daylight in our homes aren't just physical.

Studies show that Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), evidenced by emotional depression, a drop in physical energy, increased appetite, and need for more sleep, is directly linked to a lack of sufficient daylight.

Some researchers are concluding that light therapy may help to alleviate SAD symptoms faster than antidepressant drugs. In a review of clinical trials of light therapy, Dr. Daniel Kripke at the University of California, San Diego reported that light therapy benefits not only SAD patients but also people suffering from other forms of depression.

Sunlight can enter our dwellings and be balanced through the use of windows, doors and skylights.

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