

Senior Living Fall Prevention Standards: The Ultimate Checklist for Your Next Tour



Environmental hazards contribute to nearly half of all senior falls. Safety and physical therapy experts share what to look for on your next facility tour, from grab bars to hallway lighting.

Cathy Habas, Aug 07, 2026

Key Takeaways

- **Look for high-contrast markings for visual support:** Low vision can make it hard to judge depth and spatial limits. Look for high-contrast paint on door frames, walls and floor trim, as well as distinct markings or non-skid strips on stairs, curbs and floor elevation changes.
- **Check walkway and hallway accessibility:** Ensure hallways and staircases feature double-sided handrails. Outdoor paths should have smooth walking surfaces and be properly maintained throughout changing seasons like fall and winter.
- **Ask about technology and monitoring:** Inquire whether the facility utilizes safety technology, such as bed or chair sensors for residents at higher risk of falling, and ensure automatic doors remain open long enough for mobility device users to pass through comfortably.
- **Know that newer doesn't always mean safer:** A common misconception is that newer or modern facility design automatically guarantees a safer environment. What matters most is whether your loved one can move comfortably and confidently through the space.

- **Investigate the facility's safety record:** Ask staff directly about fall history, including what percentage of residents fall and what structural changes were made in response to past falls.

In senior communities, up to 60% of residents fall at least [once per year](#). In fact, falls are the leading cause of accidental mortality in adults 65 and older, frequently causing severe injuries and fatal complications.

Fortunately, [fall-preventative actions and preparation](#) – like [balance exercises](#), staying active, [home modifications](#) and caring for our eyes and ears – can lessen the severity of an accidental fall. By some estimates, nearly [half of all falls](#) are due to environmental factors like unsafe flooring or dim lighting.

You may be able to lower your loved one's risk of falls by helping them choose a well-designed [senior community](#) that is thoughtful about those environmental factors. In this guide, experts explain the fall prevention standards to look for on your next [senior living community tour](#).

Checklist: Essential Fall Prevention Features by Area

You can tell a lot about a senior living community's commitment to fall prevention by how it designs and maintains bathrooms, hallways, stairs, floors and lights. Do the desirable design elements outnumber the [red flags](#)?

Bring this list to your next tour and circle what you see.

Category	What to look for	What to avoid	Questions to ask
Flooring	• Non-slip floor • Low-pile carpet • Level thresholds	• Slick floors • High-pile carpet	• Does the floor become slick when wet? • How are wet floors marked?
		• Rugs and unsecured mats • Visually disturbing patterns • High-gloss floors	
Lighting	• Evenly lit spaces • Easy-to-use switches • Dimmable lights in rooms • Task lights • Adjustable shades or curtains • Lit hallways • Bathroom lighting	• Harsh overhead lighting • Shadowy corners or dark rooms • Glares on shiny surfaces	• How does the lighting in common areas change at night? • Is there an easy way to light the path between the bed and bathroom at night?
		• Suction-cup grab bars • Low toilet seats • Slick floors	
Bathroom	• Permanent grab bars • Low- or no-threshold shower • Textured, slip-resistant floor		• Is there enough room to use a walker? • Are towels and toiletries easy to reach?

Hallways, Stairs, Elevators	• Shower seat • High toilet seat • Motion-activated lights from bed to bathroom • Full-length handrails on both sides of stairs and hallway • Handrails on three walls of elevator • High-contrast paint on the edge of each step • Non-skid strips on steps	• High shower threshold • Incomplete handrails • Handrails on only one side • Furniture blocking handrails	• Is the bed close to the bathroom? • Is there a railing along the path from the bed to the bathroom? • Do the elevator doors stay open long enough for someone to get on with a walker? • Are the top of the stairs clearly identified for people with low vision?
	• High-contrast paint on door frames, walls and floor trim • Smooth outdoor walkways	• Cluttered or cramped spaces • Crumbling, cracked or heaved outdoor walkways • Walls that look like the floor	• How are outdoor spaces maintained in fall and winter? • Are bed or chair sensors available for residents at a higher risk of falling?

The following are important categories to consider when looking for fall prevention techniques in senior living communities:

[1. Flooring standards and anti-slip solutions](#)

[2. Lighting and visual ergonomics for low vision](#)

[3. Safe bathroom layouts and grab bar requirements](#)

[4. Hallway, stairway and elevator accessibility](#)

Flooring standards and anti-slip solutions

Unsafe flooring can cause falls in a variety of ways.

- Wet or slick floors increase the risk of slipping and falling.
- Someone may catch their foot, cane or walker on a wrinkled rug, high-pile carpet or raised transition.
- Shiny materials or intricate patterns can disorient a person with [low vision](#), and they may become unbalanced and fall.

When touring senior living communities, be sure to ask about wayfinding design – the strategic use of colors and tile patterns to help residents navigate safely.

“Some facilities have decorative tiles which are purposely put in to help older adults get around,” explains Allison Simms, physical therapist and associate director of rehabilitation services at VNS Health. However, visual cues require careful balance: flooring should avoid disorienting patterns that create the illusion of depth or movement.

Physical materials are just as vital to fall prevention. David Jefferson, vice president of real estate at Volunteers of America, notes that their communities minimize tripping hazards by using low-pile carpet, non-slip vinyl, and level thresholds. He recommends avoiding properties with high-gloss flooring, unsecured mats and decorative throw rugs.

You should also consider asking about the floor cleaning process. Do tile or vinyl floors become slick when wet? How are wet floors marked to ensure residents steer clear?

Finally, consider how easy it is to maneuver in the living spaces and common areas. Are walking paths wide and clear? Or are they crowded with clutter? Your loved one shouldn't have to turn sideways, for example, to pass another person in the hallway.

Lighting and visual ergonomics for low vision

Adequate lighting is essential for fall prevention – it reinforces natural balance through visual cues while keeping everyday obstacles clearly visible.

“You should be careful about places that have dim hallways or harsh overhead lights that produce a disorienting glare on hard surfaces,” Jefferson says. “The community should have bright, non-glare LED lights and automatic, motion-sensitive nightlights along important paths.”

He advises avoiding facilities with drastic lighting transitions between rooms. Sudden shifts in brightness delay visual adaptation, causing temporary disorientation that significantly increases fall risks.

Look for spaces with dedicated task lighting near seating, counters, and work areas. Dimmable fixtures are ideal for managing individual light sensitivities, while adjustable window shades are essential to block disorienting glare.

Ask how the lighting in common areas changes at night. This is especially important at [memory care facilities](#) because some people with dementia can struggle with [circadian rhythm](#) (an internal clock that controls the sleep-wake cycle). Seeing warm, dim light may help them wind down at night. Otherwise, people with dementia can be prone to [wander](#), which increases the risk of falls.

Safe bathroom layouts and grab bar requirements

Pay special attention to bathroom design in senior living communities. While standard bathrooms can be modified to lower the risk of falls, it's often safer and more convenient for older adults to use specially designed showers and toilets.

“Bathrooms are one of the highest-risk areas for falls because slippery surfaces are combined with frequent sitting, standing and stepping into or out of the shower,” says Gia Ramsey, the injury prevention and education outreach coordinator at Maimonides Medical Center. “Hard surfaces and fixtures can also make injuries more severe when falls occur.”

Experts agree that certain design elements can make bathrooms safer for older adults. Look for the following when touring a community:

- Permanent grab bars (not the suction-cup variety) installed next to the toilet and inside and outside the shower
- A walk-in shower with little or no threshold
- Textured, slip-resistant flooring
- Shower seating and a handheld shower head
- Raised toilet seats or higher toilets

“I also encourage families to look beyond individual safety features and think about the overall layout,” Simms says. “Is there enough room for someone using a walker to move comfortably? Are toiletries and towels within easy reach?”

Bathroom proximity is equally vital, particularly given how frequently nighttime urgency leads to falls. Simms notes that rushing to the toilet in the dark creates a dangerous combination of compromised gait and poor visibility.

Optimal layouts minimize the physical distance between the bed and the bathroom while ensuring clear sightlines, continuous wall support, and automatic low-level lighting.

Hallway, stairway and elevator accessibility

Transitional zones – like hallways, stairwells and elevators – require continuous, unobstructed handrails on both sides. On stairways and elevation changes, visual edge cues are equally critical: Look for high-contrast tread nosing, non-slip surfaces and tactile or color indicators marking the top of steps and curbs.

“With regard to elevators, verify that the doors remain open long enough for a person using a walker,” Jefferson says.

Other Senior Living Fall Prevention Standards

Here are a few other things to look for or ask about on your tour.

- There shouldn't be [clutter](#) that would affect someone's ability to safely move around, and things like electrical cords should be tucked out of the way or covered with a high-contrast cable protector.
- Ask if bed sensors or chair sensors are used to prevent falls for higher risk residents.
- Check outdoor areas for smooth walking surfaces and ask how these are maintained throughout fall and winter.
- Look for high-contrast paints on door frames, walls and floor trim, which helps seniors with changing vision accurately judge spatial limits as they move around.

Simms adds a final note of caution: “One of the biggest misconceptions is that a newer or more beautifully designed space is automatically a safer one. Instead, I encourage families to ask themselves, ‘Can my loved one move comfortably and confidently through this space?’ That's often a much better indicator of whether an environment will [support their independence](#).”

Bottom Line: Falls Can Be Prevented Through Thoughtful Design

Falls become increasingly common with age, but we don't have to accept them as inevitable. Senior living communities can provide [health benefits and reduce loneliness](#), and those communities with fall prevention infrastructure can dramatically lower the risk of falling.

For every community on your shortlist, ask what percentage of residents fall, how many of those falls have been traced back to an environmental or design factor and what changes were made as a result of those falls. A senior community that's serious about fall prevention should be able to answer these important questions.

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