

Toilet and commode safety

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Photo: EIMC

In the last issue we discussed safety in the tub and shower (visit us online at www.solutionsmagazine.ca for a copy of this article). In this article we will review other safety tips for the bathroom.

The first thing to remember is your mobility aid (cane, rollator or walker) if you use one. Don't fool yourself by thinking that "the bathroom is close/small so I don't need my cane." Using the sink, door frame etc, to steady yourself is not adequate and can lead to a fall.

One of the easiest ways to increase safety is to ensure adequate lighting. The path to the bathroom as well as the bathroom itself should be well lit to ensure you avoid any obstacles. You can do this by putting a night light in your bathroom so when it is dark, at least it is easier to find the light switch.

Next, get rid of the scatter mats around the sink and toilet. These mats, even with a rubber backing can roll at the edges and catch your feet. This in turn can cause a fall.

Quick tip

Keep a night light on at all times. A salt crystal lamp in the bathroom can help guide the way in the dark and provide you with enough light until you can turn on the light switch in order to prevent falls.

Assistive devices to prevent falls

If you have trouble standing after using the toilet, you may find raising the height of the toilet seat a benefit. This is accomplished by a riser or raised toilet seat. These devices typically raise the height of the seat from 2 to 4 inches, and come in a variety of models:

- **Toilevator.** This platform fits under a standard toilet, raising the whole toilet approximately 3.5 inches. It is unobtrusive, and does not change the configuration (or style) of the toilet seat, bowl and lid. It takes some skill to install, and may require the services of a plumber.

- **Toilet seat elevator.** This handy device fits between the toilet bowl and the seat and is secured through the same bolt holes that secure the current toilet seat. As the current seat and lid are still used, the toilet seat elevator blends in with the toilet and is again fairly unobtrusive. It is important to measure your toilet bowl opening before purchasing once as they come in a standard or elongated models to fit different toilet styles and sizes.
- **Raised toilet seat.** Expect to find a variety of different models in the market. Some may come with arm rests to make rising from the toilet easier. Most fit on top of the bowl, and do not accommodate the current seat and lid. Others might have their own lid. The key feature to look for is a locking mechanism. It is important that the raised toilet seat locks securely to your toilet so you have a stable surface to sit on and rise from. If the raised toilet seat is not well secured to the bowl, it may shift and cause you to lose your balance.

Commodes

One option, if the bathroom seems too far away, especially at night, is to consider a bedside stationary commode. Typically, commodes can be positioned over the toilet, or equipped with a bucket. Some commodes have wheels, so they can be moved from the bed side to the bathroom, and may be able to be positioned over the toilet. If wheels are present on the commode, it is important that these are securely locked (brakes on) when the commode is at the bedside, so it does not move out of position

during transfers. Many commodes can be adjusted in height, so make sure that the commode is high enough to ensure an easy transfer. Check to make sure though that all legs of the commode are adjusted to the same height to ensure that the commode doesn't wobble.

Grab bars

If you need support to rise from the toilet, grab bars can be installed. As discussed in the previous article, soap dishes and towel bars should never be used to help you maintain your balance. If you choose not to get a raised toilet seat with arm rests one of the following pieces of equipment might be helpful:

- **Wall mounted grab bar.** These come in a variety of lengths and shapes. Consider where the support would be the most helpful, and whether or not your bathroom wall is close enough to the toilet. If the wall studs are not in a good location for mounting the grab bar, other mounting solutions may be available.
- **Wall mounted flip up grab bar.** More discrete, flip up grab bars are mounted on the same wall as the toilet and flip up parallel to the wall when not in use.
- **Safety frame.** Like a pair of armrests, this assistive device mounts to the toilet and then extends to the floor to provide stability. This type of frame can usually be used with or without a raised toilet seat.
- **Floor to ceiling grab bar (e.g. SuperPole).** This pole attaches to the floor and ceiling and does not need to be near a wall. Poles can attach either through a friction or tension fit or be anchored into the ceiling and floor. This type of solution works well when the wall is too far away or is at the wrong angle, or when the safety frame can not be mounted in a convenient location.

Clear the clutter

Remove items that are either not used or expired. Place the items you use most frequently in the easier to reach cupboards. This will reduce the amount of stooping and reaching you need to do in the bathroom.

This is also a good time to consider the medications you are taking, especially if you

have had a fall. Talk with your doctor about the impact your medications may have on balance, strength, fatigue and the potential risk of falls. Don't forget to tell your doctor about any over-the-counter medications you are taking, as they also may react with prescribed medications.



Photo: Dynamic Healthcare Solutions

Night time convenience

Many of these commodes are height adjustable so they can be set up at best height to make transfers easier. It's possible to use incontinence products, such as pads or briefs, if you are unsure of whether or not you can make it to the bathroom in

time. Rushing can lead to a fall.

Sit when possible

Make sure you have a place to sit if you spend time grooming in front of the mirror in the bathroom. If your hands are occupied with an activity (such as using a hair dryer), your balance may not be as good.

Think ahead. If you tend to lock the bathroom door, make sure there is an emergency lock release. This will enable someone coming to assist you to quickly unlock and open the door.

Many bathrooms are small, with doors that open into the bathroom itself. Consider re-mounting the door to the bathroom so that it swings out. If you don't have room, remove the door and replace it with a curtain.

Finally think about investing in a cordless phone, or an answering machine. Many people feel compelled to rush to answer the telephone when it rings. Better to receive a message, than to fall on your way to the telephone. ●



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Quick tip
Don't rely on bathroom fixtures such as the sink to offer you support—they were not designed to prevent falls. Clear the bathroom of all obstructions, such as scatter mats and extra furnishings.

“The best measure of a man's honesty isn't his income tax return. It's the zero adjust on his bathroom scale.”
Arthur C. Clarke