



What's Cookin'?

THE SITUATION

Who doesn't look forward to savory aromas meeting them when they enter the kitchen? Whether it's Grandpa's homemade sauce or Mom's holiday cookies, the kitchen is a warm and inviting place—the room that often makes a house a home. Yet the kitchen in general and cooking in particular present a high risk for accidents and injuries, especially for individuals with Alzheimer's disease, who often have difficulties with memory, balance, judgment and sense of smell, and for the elderly, who are more susceptible to falls and food borne illnesses.

THE SOLUTION

- **Safeguard the area.** Similar to safe proofing other areas of the house, install safety latches on cabinets and drawers that store dangerous items (knives, scissors, matches, medications and cleaning products), and place locks on refrigerators-freezers. Store appliances, such as blenders and toasters, when not in use, and replace those that have frayed cords. Disable the garbage disposal. Install faucet scald guards for controlled water temperature. Remove artificial fruit, magnets and other items that appear edible to prevent choking or other injury.
- **Prevent falls.** Ensure that the kitchen is well lit. Take away or fasten down scatter rugs in eating areas, as well as in the rest of the house, to avert tripping. Also remove chairs with wheels. Place a water-absorbent non-skid mat in front of the sink to avoid slippery floors when washing dishes. Keep frequently-used items on low shelves.
- **Guard the oven.** For individuals who should no longer be cooking, several options exist to prevent this activity: putting covers on oven burners, removing stove knobs and installing an automatic shut-off switch. When someone is cooking, turn pot handles inwards, and never leave the food unattended.
- **Encourage doable tasks.** Since the kitchen is a familiar place for individuals with Alzheimer's disease, encourage involvement in tasks that do not pose risks, utilize remaining strengths and stir memories. For example, depending on the person's ability, responsibilities could include mixing ingredients, kneading dough, washing produce, laying out placemats and discussing meal preparation.
- **Prepare food properly.** Wash your hands thoroughly in warm soapy water for at least 20 seconds before, during and after food preparation. Keep raw meats apart from ready-to-eat foods, and use separate, plastic cutting boards to avoid cross-contamination. Wash all fruits and vegetables in warm water. Refrigerate food (leftovers within two hours) at below 40 degrees.
- **Cook it right.** Cook food to the proper temperature to destroy harmful bacteria, using a food thermometer to be sure. For example, according to the United States Food and Drug Administration, poultry breasts should be cooked to 170 degrees; ground beef, 160 degrees; and casseroles and other dishes containing eggs, 160 degrees. Avoid foods that pose greater risks to older adults, such as raw or undercooked meats, seafood and poultry, and unpasteurized dairy products and juices.
- **Discard spoiled food.** Throw out expired items in the refrigerator, freezer and food cabinets. In the case of power outages, from severe storms, hurricanes or other incidences, discard refrigerated perishable foods after four hours and frozen foods after 48 hours without power. "When in doubt, throw it out," according to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA).
- **Play it safe.** For food safety questions, call the USDA hot line at 888-674-6854. If symptoms of food poisoning occur, such as nausea, diarrhea and vomiting, call the person's primary care provider or 911 if necessary.
- **Take fire precautions.** Put flammable items, like paper towels and dish clothes, away from the stove. Keep the cooking area free of grease, and wear tight-fitting sleeves while cooking. If a fire starts: in the oven, close the door and turn off the heat; on a stovetop, cover the pan with a lid and shut the burner; and in the microwave, shut the door and unplug the microwave. Never store or use flammable liquids in the kitchen. Do not use the oven to heat the house.

— WRITTEN BY JESSIE OSBORNE

PREPARE IN ADVANCE

In the kitchen, keep: a working smoke detector, a readily-available fire extinguisher, a phone within reach while cooking, and emergency telephone numbers posted in a highly visible place. Practice an emergency exit plan and assign someone to assist the individual with Alzheimer's disease in case of fire.