

Planning to age in place? Don't overlook the need for balanced natural light



(BPT) - When homeowners think about improvements that can allow them to stay in their homes longer as they grow older, they may focus on things like grab bars in the bathroom or wider doorways to boost accessibility and safety. Yet they often overlook another critical type of improvement that addresses both those concerns, and directly affects seniors' health - access to glare-free, balanced natural light.

Age-related changes in vision like cataracts or macular degeneration can mean you'll require more quality light to see well. Yet artificial light can create glare or affect visual acuity. What's more, simply adding more artificial lights could increase your electricity bill - at a point in your life where controlling expenses is more important than ever. Natural light can be the answer.

The benefits of natural light are well-documented. It allows people to see better in order to perform tasks, affects the body's sleep rhythms, influences mood and perception, and facilitates important bodily processes, according to a report by the Center for Health Design. Bringing more natural light into the home can be especially beneficial for seniors who may not get out as much, have vision issues, have trouble regulating their sleep cycles or experience feelings of isolation and depression.

If you're considering making home improvements to help you age in place more enjoyably, here are three ways to incorporate more natural light into your home redesign:

» Ditch the heavy drapes - If your windows currently have thick, heavy drapes for privacy and insulation, consider replacing them with cordless blinds or even remote operated blinds - two styles that are friendly for people with dexterity issues. These easier-to-open blinds will allow you to maximize the amount of natural light that enters your home through windows, and removing heavy-looking drapes will brighten up the interior decor.

» Install skylights - Natural light from above can be a great way to enhance your ability to see well, improve your mood, and encourage your body to produce more vitamin D. Installing Energy Star-qualified solar-powered fresh-air skylights allows you to provide balanced

natural light and passive ventilation to any space, including bathrooms (where privacy is a concern) and kitchens (where visual acuity is critical for everyday tasks). Skylight manufacturer Velux America makes their products especially friendly for seniors by providing programmable remote-controls to open and close their fresh-air skylights, as well as their light-controlling solar-powered blinds, which are available in designer colors and patterns to brighten your decor while increasing skylight energy efficiency.

And when downsizing, seniors can use skylights to make a smaller room feel larger. Sara and Frank Mansbach, homeowners in Greenville, South Carolina, downsized when they approached retirement age and utilized skylights in their new home. "I read a lot and am on the computer a lot," Mrs. Mansbach says, "and it isn't until eight at night that we ever turn on any lights because the light is just there for us to use. And on those winter days when it's cold outside, it's cheerful in here. The light comes in and the warmth comes in and it brightens your spirits."

What's more, whether you are installing new skylights or replacing older glass or plastic bubble skylights, the latest solar powered models, and solar powered blinds, are eligible for a 30 percent federal tax credit as are installation costs. Visit www.whyskylights.com to learn more.

» Enhance light with color - Paint is always one of the easiest, most cost-effective ways to improve a home's interior - and repainting in lighter, more vision-friendly colors and textures can help maximize the value of the natural light that enters a room. Choose bright, pleasing colors in paint textures that minimize glare, which can make it difficult for aging eyes to see well. Pay attention to the Light Reflectance Value (LVR) of the paint you're considering - this number provided by paint manufacturers on sample chips and labels tells you how much light the color reflects vs. absorbs. Seniors should aim for paints in the LVR mid-range of 40-60.

Many home improvements can make it possible to age in place while enjoying your home well into retirement. Increasing balanced natural lighting is an important improvement that not only affects the livability of your home, but your physical and mental wellbeing, too.