

AARP Smart Guide: 29 Ways to Make Your Home Safer and More Secure

Your home might be hazardous to your health — consider making these improvements

by Matt Alderton

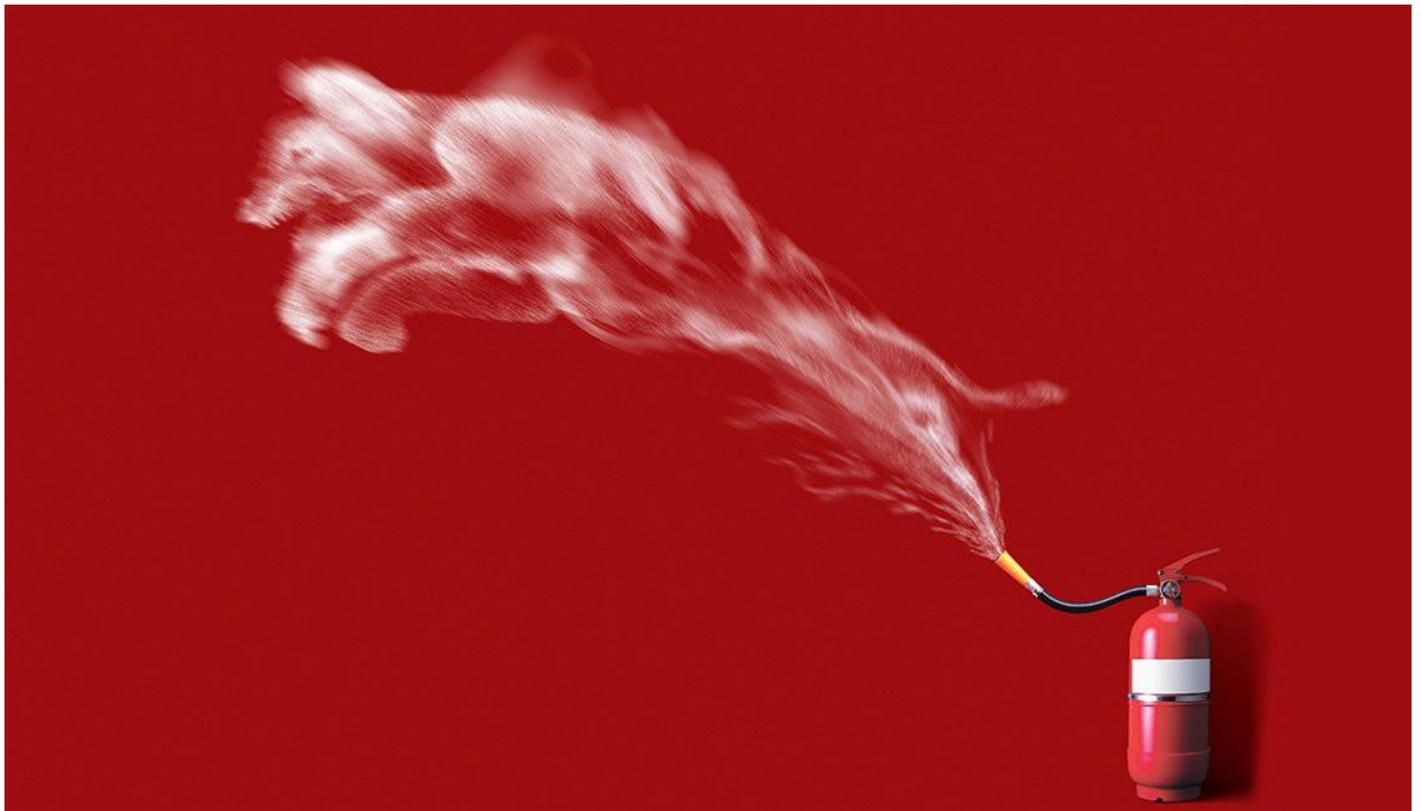


STOCKSEY

Home is where the heart is. Unfortunately, it's also where the hazards are, according to the National Safety Council (NSC), which says preventable accidents injure one American every second.

Although the risk is much smaller compared with accidents, crime also is a concern, according to the safety website SafeWise, whose annual "The State of Safety in America" report ([https:// www.safewise.com/state-of-safety/](https://www.safewise.com/state-of-safety/)) summarizes the biggest safety concerns of more than 15,000 Americans. In 2021, property crime and violent crime top its list of safety concerns that keep people up at night.

Here's the good news: Whether you're anxious about kitchen fires, slippery floors or intruders, there are easy, affordable ways to make your home safer.



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FUNDAMENTALS OF FIRE SAFETY

1. Strengthen your smoke alarm

Three out of 5 people who die in home fires live in properties without a smoke alarm, according to the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA).

Even if you have smoke alarms, you might need better ones, notes home inspector Bruce Barker, president of the American Society of Home Inspectors and of Dream Home Consultants, a building inspection firm in the Raleigh, North Carolina, area. “There are two types of smoke alarms,” he says. “Ionization smoke alarms are more common and less expensive, but don’t do a great job detecting smoky fires. Photoelectric smoke alarms do a much better job.” (NFPA recommends using both in your home, and there are combination alarms available as well.)

Even if you have smoke alarms they may still need replacing. “Smoke alarms have a limited service life,” continues Barker, who says the sensors in smoke alarms typically last only 10 years. “If you press the test button, all you might be testing is whether the horn goes off. You may not be testing the actual sensor. And if the sensor’s bad, it’s not going to work.”

While you’re swapping out smoke alarms, there are two more upgrades worth considering, according to Sharon Cooksey, fire safety educator for smoke alarm manufacturer Kidde. One is a 10-year sealed lithium battery smoke alarm, which eliminates the need to replace smoke alarm batteries — something you should do every six months with a conventional smoke alarm. The other is a strobe alarm or bed shaker.

“For those older residents who are deaf or hard-of-hearing, or who remove hearing aids to sleep, consider installing alarms with flashing lights for a greater chance of waking a sleeping person,” Cooksey says.

You also should be mindful of smoke alarm placement. Barker says corners often are “dead spots.”

“Alarms should be installed on every level of the home — including basements — in every bedroom and outside each sleeping area,” adds Cooksey, who recommends installing wireless interconnected smoke alarms. If one alarm sounds, all alarms throughout the home sound in unison.

2. Get ‘smart’ about risky appliances

Electrical failures and malfunctions are responsible for 13 percent of home fires, according to NFPA.

To prevent electrical fires, consider plugging high-risk appliances such as microwaves, toasters and space heaters, into smart plugs that can monitor wall sockets for high temperatures and automatically turn devices off if they get too hot, suggests Katie McEntire, a security writer for SafeWise. You can control smart plugs remotely through your smartphone and program them to turn appliances off when they’re not in use so that you don’t accidentally leave something on while you’re sleeping or away.

“Hair straighteners and heat tools can be really good things to use with smart plugs,” McEntire says.

To reduce the risk of electrical fires, avoid plugging high-wattage appliances like space heaters into multi-plug devices, which are typically designed for lower watts. “My fire district has seen a few severe and even fatal fires from overloading electrical extension cords,” says Charles Moore, fire chief at Truckee Meadows Fire & Rescue in Reno, Nevada. “We message our citizens by stating that electric heaters be plugged directly into the wall outlet with at least 3 feet of clearance to combustibles.”

3. Store combustibles strategically

Garages, laundry rooms and basements are common places to store toxic and combustible items. But they may not be the wisest storage places, cautions retired firefighter Chuck Roydhouse, owner of Clean Sweep of Anne Arundel County, a chimney maintenance company in Millersville, Maryland, and a Chimney Safety Institute of America certified chimney sweep.

“Don’t store any gasoline or fueled-up, gasoline-powered equipment in your basement, laundry room, utility room or anywhere else in your home,” advises Roydhouse. “The vapors off-gassing are heavier than air, which means they’ll sink to a low level. And as they travel through the floor, they’ll seek an ignition source. If you have a pilot light that comes on for a gas water heater, or you get an arc or a spark created from an electric water heater, a light switch or an oil furnace as it comes on, that can ignite the vapor.”

Roydhouse suggests storing charcoal, topsoil, pool chemicals and oily rags — all of which are combustible — in airtight metal containers away from the house. The same advice applies for ashes from the fireplace and woodstove, which can ignite if they blow onto furniture inside, or onto decks and vinyl siding outside.

And take a look at that junk drawer: Even the 9-volt batteries in your junk drawer can start fires if they touch metal. NFPA suggests storing them away from common household items like paper clips, coins, pens and other batteries. And you should never throw 9-volts in the trash. Instead drop them off at your local hazardous waste collection site with other hazardous materials.

4. Eliminate lint, dust and ... bird’s nests?

Dryer vents should be cleaned every year, according to Roydhouse, who cites an unlikely risk: birds, who like to nest in them. “Lint and bird nesting is very flammable,” he says.

Your chimney also should be cleaned annually. “Chimney cleaning is important to knock out the creosote that sticks to the wall of the chimney,” says Mitchell Blackmon, owner of Patriot Chimney in Roanoke, Virginia. He notes that chimney fires in the United States are responsible for some 22,300 house fires causing 20 deaths and more than \$100 million in property damage every year. Creosote is highly flammable, Blackmon says, and can cause negative health effects such as skin and eye irritation, respiratory issues and cancer.

5. School yourself on extinguishers

Fire extinguishers are helpful — if you know how to use them. “You want to have at least one maintained 5-pound ABC fire extinguisher on each level of the home, and you want to make sure everyone in the home knows how to use the fire extinguisher,” says Roydhouse, who offers the acronym: P-A-S-S, which stands for pull the pin, aim, squeeze the trigger and sweep side to side.

“You never want to direct nozzle pressure directly into the center of the fire. That will typically blow it around or spread it. Instead, you want to do a sweeping motion and spread the chemical agent that’s coming out, like throwing a scattered handful of flour.”

6. Close your bedroom door at night — and make it easier to open

In a fire, every minute counts. In a TikTok video that he made, firefighter Aaron Salkill of Marietta, Georgia, says you should never sleep with your bedroom door open. “Sleeping with your door closed keeps smoke and fire out long enough for the [fire department] to get to your home,” he advises.

Speaking of doors: Make sure yours are easy to open in an emergency. If you’ve got arthritis or otherwise have trouble gripping traditional door knobs, consider replacing with levers.



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IMPEDE INTRUDERS

7. Rethink your security alarm location

If you want to scare off intruders, a security alarm is essential. What you might not have considered, however, is the alarm’s location.

“No home security alarm is 100 percent effective if its location is easily accessible to intruders. There is still room for improvement if the control pad location is too noticeable and within hand’s reach,” says Demi Stanley, a locksmith coordinator at Speedy Locksmith in London, England. “Rather than installing the control pad next to your front door, look for a hidden area, such as a back or side door or hallway. Cut down the risk of break-in further when you mount a few keypads at several places with a hard-to-crack PIN code.”

8. Let Alexa protect you

If you don’t have a full-blown security system, you can use your smart speaker as a security alarm, points out SafeWise Community Manager Rebecca Edwards, who says the Amazon Echo has a little-known feature called Alexa Guard and Alexa Guard Plus.

“Alexa Guard is kind of like a free security system,” Edwards says. “We all know that Alexa listens. If you turn on Alexa Guard, your Amazon Echo will listen for signs of trouble — like the sound of glass breaking — and send you alerts if it hears them.”

For a monthly fee, you can upgrade to Alexa Guard Plus, which will listen for activity within the house, like footsteps and doors closing, while you’re away from home; play noises to deter intruders, like sirens and barking dogs; and connect you with an emergency helpline if you ask Alexa to call for help.

9. Install a video doorbell

With a video doorbell, you can see on your smartphone or tablet who is at the door before you answer it, and communicate with them if necessary. If a suspicious person shows up at your doorstep, you can tell them to scram without ever opening the door.

“Being able to do that is really reassuring,” says Edwards, whose favorite video doorbell detects when someone is lurking on your doorstep — a burglar, for instance, or a package thief — and deters them by announcing the camera is recording. “It’s watching out for people, and if they’re hanging around it will automatically go off and record them, which is really cool.”

If you’re not ready for a video doorbell or have concerns over their privacy vulnerabilities, consider installing a traditional peephole — preferably one with a wide angle, hung at a viewable height. “A standard door viewer often misses the entire perimeter in front of your home,” Stanley says. “A wide-angle peephole on the entry door that matches the occupant’s height would help every adult in the household look through the peephole without struggling to see a stranger or a friend.”

10. Look to your landscape

Landscaping can be a crime deterrent, according to Edwards. “If your house and your yard are unkempt, it makes your home look vacant, which makes it more of a target,” she says. “Also, if you have overgrown bushes and trees, those are places lurkers can hide. You want to keep those things trim so you can see what’s going on outside.”

Thorny plants like rosebushes, cacti and holly planted under windows will prick those who get too close, and fences can make it difficult for intruders to reach entry points. If package theft is happening in your neighborhood, consider getting a locked mailbox large enough for packages. Additionally, motion-sensing lights for low-lit areas can help to stop someone in his tracks.

11. Go keyless

Whether you store them under your welcome mat, inside a planter or on a neighbor's key ring, spare keys are a liability. And for that matter, so are primary keys, according to Matt Zimmer, divisional vice president of security marketing for Spectrum Brands' Hardware and Home Improvement Division, which owns the door hardware brand Kwikset. Although it's unlikely, he says, a valet could make an impression of your house key when you hand over your keys at a restaurant, and could consult the registration in your glove box for your address. Or perhaps you recently moved into a new home and never changed the locks, in which case your home is wide open to prior occupants and anyone with whom they may have shared a key.

"It's like buying a laptop off the internet and not changing the password," says Zimmer, who recommends replacing manual locks with electronic locks that use keypads, or smart locks that you control with your smartphone. Both allow you to easily create and change access codes so you can control who may enter your home and when.

For even greater security, Zimmer notes, locks like Kwikset's SmartCode 916 touchscreen dead bolt have a "SecureScreen" feature that scrambles the initial numbers that need to be entered before you can provide your code. These first two random numbers that need to be pressed help scatter the smudge pattern. In order to prevent "smudge attacks," wherein intruders can discern one's keyless entry code by deciphering the fingerprints on the touchscreen.

12. Install bump- and pick-resistant locks

Whether you prefer manual or electronic locks, make sure they have bump-resistant dead bolts, advises Zimmer, who says bump-resistant locks are constructed with special pins that inhibit lock bumping — a lock-picking technique wherein intruders acquire a special type of key that they can force into your lock with a hammer or screwdriver in order to open it.

13. Replace exterior door hinges and screws

Exterior doors are typically installed to swing inward toward the house. But exterior doors that open outward can be a security risk because the hinges are exposed to intruders, Barker says.

"You can have as many locks on the door as you want. All the bad guys have to do is pop the pins out of the hinge, take the door off and go right in," says Barker, who recommends installing security hinges with tamper-proof pins.

Even if your doors swing inward, you might want to consider rehanging them with stronger screws in both the hinges and the strike plate so it's harder for intruders to kick in your door. "You need thicker, longer

screws — typically about 3 inches — that reach through the doorjamb and into the stud that's behind it, Zimmer says.

14. Secure your car

If you have a vehicle with keyless ignition, you might assume that it's inherently secure. Unfortunately, it isn't. Many people across the U.S. have found their vehicles rifled through — or stolen from — although they remember locking the doors. That's because thieves can use a cheap relay box to copy the electronic signal that your vehicle's key fob transmits to your car's computer system.

To prevent this, store your key fob away from your car, wrapped in foil, or kept in a safe. Numerous companies also make metal boxes that disrupt the signal.



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STAND UP TO FALLS

15. Let there be light

One of the best weapons against falls is also the simplest: light. Smart bulbs are a modern way to get more of it when and where you need it. For example, GE Lighting makes a wireless motion sensor that connects via Bluetooth to its Cync line of smart bulbs; it “automatically turns lights ... on when motion is detected in the room and turns them off when the room is unoccupied,” explains Paul Williams, general manager of product management and growth.

Similarly, the Philips Hue Indoor Motion Sensor for Smart Lights works with Alexa and can turn on when you walk into a room, and off when you leave. The Wyze Bulb, which works with Alexa or Google Assistant, can be configured to a schedule or turned on or off with your voice.

If you’re not keen on smart-home setups, GE also offers lower-tech solutions like the LED+ Timer bulb, an indoor bulb that you can set to automatically turn on and off without the use of an app. Or you can replace traditional light switches with motion-activated alternatives, notes Sean Fitzgerald, president of TruBlue Total House Care, a Cincinnati-based franchise that provides total home-care, including handyman services, in many areas across the country.

“There are even battery-operated motion lights that you can get for a couple bucks and stick with 3M tape over a garage door, at the top of the stairs or wherever it is that you need it,” says Fitzgerald, who adds that lighting also is important outdoors to increase security and to avoid tripping on sidewalks, tree roots, uneven pavers and other hazards.

And, having a tech panel custom-installed alongside the bed lets you control lighting, music and television without having to rummage the room for switches; many such “room control systems” are now run on tablet devices.

16. Install grab bars — properly

Because it’s easy, affordable and effective, installing grab bars in bathrooms is one of the most common home improvements people make in order to prevent falls. But many are installed incorrectly, according to Daniel Edwards, owner of Handyman Connection, a home repair and renovation company in South Shore, Massachusetts.

“Grab bars in the shower and around the toilet are often recommended, but it’s essential that they also be properly installed into the studs of a wall, not just drywall,” he says. “Improperly installed grab bars are extremely dangerous, as they will not be able to hold up weight and will pull out of the wall easily if grabbed.”

Adds occupational therapist Lynda G. Shrager, author of *Age in Place: A Guide to Modifying, Organizing, and Decluttering Mom and Dad’s Home*: “If using them inside the shower or tub, I highly recommend getting the textured ones that do not become slippery when wet.”

17. Throw away those throw rugs

For older adults, especially, throw rugs can be a major tripping hazard. For that reason, many safety experts recommend removing them from the home entirely.

But not all rugs are bad, insists Shrager. “To decide if you can keep a rug, the first thing to assess is the condition of the underside. Chances are that the backing on old rugs has worn down, making them slippery,” she says. “Try the ‘Shrager Twist Test’ to determine if the rug is safe. Simply step on the rug with your feet about 12 inches apart, wiggle your hips and try to do the twist ... If the rug moves under your feet, it is not safe.”

If you have a slippery throw rug that you can’t bear to part with, try this hack that building professional Ken Long, owner/operator at CODE SAVVI, a Canadian-based building code app., shared on TikTok: Turn the rug over and apply silicone caulking around the border, then down the middle in the shape of an “X.” Use a putty knife or piece of cardboard to smooth it out, then let it dry to create a non-slip backing.

Because they’re big enough to stay put, large area rugs and long hall runners generally are not hazardous, according to Shrager — unless they curl upward. Although it isn’t a perfect solution, and may need to be replaced frequently to retain its adhesion, rug tape can help prevent that from happening.

For safe transitions to carpeted rooms from rooms with hardwood, concrete or tile, consider installing carpet edging or transition strips, which come in a variety of materials — rubber, vinyl, aluminum, wood — and create a “bridge” between uneven surfaces.

18. Watch your step on steps

Inside and outside, make sure there are railings on both sides of stairways, advises Shrager. “If at all possible, the railings should be extended beyond the top and bottom steps to give needed support to steady oneself before stepping on or off the staircase,” she says.

Stairs can be made even safer by spraying them with a coat of anti-slip floor finish, by installing anti-slip stair treads, and/or by painting or taping the edge of each tread with a contrasting color so that it’s easier to see.

And don’t forget surreptitious outdoor steps. “A product called an outdoor step is an inexpensive and safe way to reduce the rise when stepping in or out of the house,” Shrager says. “It is a sturdy platform with a rubber surface to prevent slippage. It is lightweight and works well with any high step.”

Rubber transition ramps are another option for thresholds, sliding doors and other vertical barriers.

19. Reimagine railings

Railings aren’t just for staircases and steps. “A handrail can be constructed to go along the walkways leading out to the backyard or along the sidewalk and out to the driveway. They can be incorporated into planters or blended in with shrubs that are maintained at the correct height,” says Shrager, who also likes to see railings in hallways. “A railing placed in a long, poorly lit hallway can provide support and security, especially for those late-night ‘runs’ from the bedroom to the bathroom.”

20. Control cords

Cords from lamps, televisions, computers, phone chargers and more can be serious tripping

hazards. To eliminate them, avail yourself of cord management solutions. Options include cable covers that lie on top of cords, cable sleeves that wrap around cords, cord winders that coil them and cable management boxes that contain them.

21. Bolster your bed

Your bed should be a refuge, not a risk. To make it safer, adjust its height, suggests Shrager. “The lower the height of the bed, the easier it is to get on to. But ... the higher it is, the easier it is to get off of,” she says. “Ideally, when you are sitting on the edge of the bed with knees and ankles bent at 90 degrees, your feet should rest flat on the floor. For the easiest transfers getting in and out of the bed, the height from the floor to the top of the mattress should be around 22 inches.”

If your bed is too low, you can use furniture risers to lift it up. If it’s too high, remove wheels from the bed frame if it has them, switch from a standard box spring to a shallow one or get a platform bed that uses no box spring at all. Add sensors along the bed’s baseboard that can trigger gentle-glow night-lights. Companies such as Emotionlite and Vansky make them.

While you’re at it, invest in a transfer-handle bed rail. “Transfer-handle bed rails are an effective modification to help you move around in bed and to assist with sitting, standing and balance before taking those first steps away from the bed,” Shrager says.

22. Adjust storage to fit your needs

Store things you need frequently lower instead of higher, including small kitchen appliances and electronics, for example, and even clothes in your closet.

“If you just drop your closet rod, you can make it so much easier to reach,” Shrager says. “If you insist on being a ‘climber,’ get a safe stool ... My requirements are a wide-based step with treads and a rubber bottom. Some have a safety bar handrail, like you may see in doctors’ offices to help patients get up on the table. Also, one step is enough. Any more may cause issues with equilibrium. Avoid folding stools that have the potential to collapse.”

23. Avoid seasonal slips

If you live in a cold climate, and have the opportunity and budget, snow-melting systems are a worthwhile luxury, according to Shrager. “As a home ages, resurfacing or replacing the sidewalk may be needed, and you might consider installing heat producing coils that can prevent snowpack and ice from forming,” she says.

If you can’t afford an improvement of that scale, consider electric snow- and ice-melting mats — HeatTrak, ThermoSoft and Cozy Winters are three companies that sell them. Search online for “ice breaker” mats and stair treads that are designed for easy ice removal.

BREATHE EASIER

24. Improve indoor air quality

The air in your home might be making you sick, according to Aaron Hartman, M.D., a physician at Richmond Integrative & Functional Medicine in Midlothian, Virginia. It's especially important for those living in areas where the outdoor air quality can be poor.

"There are many things about indoor air quality that can directly affect your health — but one of the most critical factors is particulate matter," explains Hartman, who says research has linked particulate matter to multiple chronic health issues, including cardiovascular disease, lung disease, brain inflammation, strokes and dementia.

There are many ways to reduce particulate matter in your home. First, upgrade the air filter in your HVAC system to one with a high minimum efficiency reporting value (MERV) — preferably one with a rating between 13 and 16. (Seventeen and higher are rarely recommended for a residential home.)

"Your HVAC system is a critical part of conditioning your air, but many people do not realize that it can actually be a source for mold, toxins, bacteria and the like in your house. Putting a MERV 13 to 16 filter on the intake of your air handler will prevent the air handler from being seeded with particles like dust, dust mites and dander," Hartman says. But follow specifications closely — too strong a filter can damage your HVAC system. If you're unsure what's best for your furnace, talk to a service repair technician.

Second, place air purifiers with HEPA filters in the rooms you use the most. "Installing a MERV does not clean the air in your rooms. You need air movement and flow in order to get rooms really clean. The purpose of an air-conditioner is to condition the air — not move it. In order to get proper flow, you need some sort of freestanding HEPA filter," Hartman continues. "A true HEPA filter, by definition, filters out 99.97 percent of air particles."

25. Mitigate mold

Mold can aggravate allergies and asthma, irritate the eyes and lungs, and in some people might even trigger serious illness. Dehumidifiers are an easy way to prevent it, according to Charlie Leduc, chief operations officer of Mold Busters, a mold removal company in Ottawa, Canada. "Dehumidifiers should be used in the basement if you have one," he says. "Make certain that it is a powerful enough machine to cover the square footage of the space."

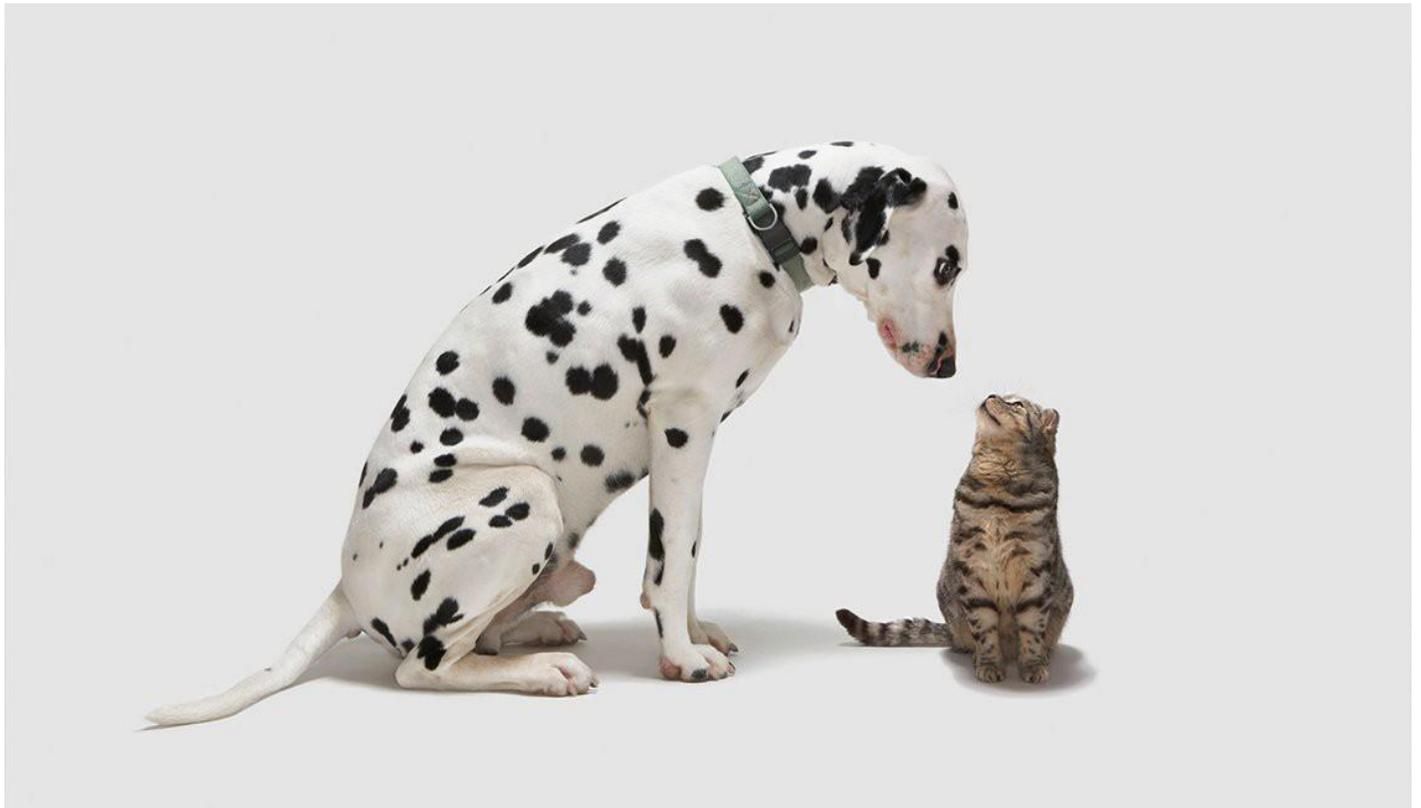
While dehumidifiers can make basements dry, it's even better to prevent mold-causing moisture in the first place, according to Barker, who suggests adjusting downspouts. "Make sure your gutters are clean and working, make sure your downspouts avert away from the house and make sure that water flows away from the house," he says. "Doing that will take care of a significant portion of water problems in crawl spaces and basements."

One more simple thing you can do, Barker adds, is to use bathroom exhaust fans when you're bathing. "Turn it on when you start your shower or bath and leave it on for 10 minutes or so afterwards," he says. "Doing that will help you control moisture, which will help you control mold."

26. Guard against gases

Although you can often see and smell mold, your home's biggest airborne threats — carbon monoxide and radon — are invisible and odorless. To protect yourself from the former, make sure you have a working carbon monoxide detector, advises Roydhouse, who says the same rules apply for carbon monoxide detectors as with smoke alarms: Put one on every level of your home, replace the batteries every six months and replace the device itself every 10 years.

Unfortunately, carbon monoxide detectors don't sense radon. For that, you'll need to purchase a radon testing kit. The test takes only a few minutes and should be repeated once every two years, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.



TIM MACPHERSON/PLAINPICTURE

DON'T FORGET ABOUT FIFI AND FIDO

Prune your plant collection

27.

If you're a pet parent, you want your home to be as safe for your fur babies as it is for you. That might require removing or replacing the plants in your home, according to Robin Ganzert, president and CEO of American Humane. "Common house plants can be a huge issue," she says. "If you have house plants that you absolutely love, do a Google search to find out if they're poisonous."

According to the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, plants that can be poisonous to pets include lilies, tulip bulbs, azaleas and ivy.

28.

28. Block access to toxic substances

To prevent pets from ingesting them, Ganzert recommends storing medications, cleaners, chemicals and laundry supplies on high shelves or locked away from animals' reach. For adults who are prone to falls, however, that's a bad idea. A fall-proof alternative, she says, is storing them in a covered plastic storage tote in an accessible location.

Something else that needs to have a secure lid is your trash can, which is typically full of items that can harm your pet. "Trash cans are a huge danger, so they should be covered or inside a locked cabinet," Ganzert says.

29.

Put a ring on it

Anyone who's had a clingy dog or cat knows that pets can easily get underfoot. That can be dangerous for animals and owners alike, according to Ganzert who recommends that pets wear collars with bells so that you'll always hear them coming. "For cats, I like a breakaway collar," she says. "That way, if a cat gets caught on something they won't choke."