LIGHTING YOUR WAY TO BETTER VISION
As we get older, nothing is more frustrating than not being able to see as well as we used to. An eye examination and new glasses can be a big help, but proper lighting is just as critical.

No matter whether you’re going to continue living in your home, or you’re moving to an apartment or retirement community, lighting is going to become an ever more important part of your everyday life. It will add to your comfort and enjoyment. And, it will help to keep you safe.

This brochure describes some of the changes that can be made to your home’s existing lighting to make your home more comfortable and secure. Some solutions are easily accomplished by plugging in a new fixture to an electric outlet. Others require changing fixtures or providing additional electrical boxes for new fixtures. If you are not a skilled handyman, it is recommended that you hire qualified people to do the work for you.

Understanding the basics of lighting

- Ambient light is the general lighting of the room for walking around, conversation and identifying objects.
- Task lighting provides higher light levels in a specific area for performing visual tasks, i.e. reading, sewing, cutting, etc.
- Accent light is used to highlight artwork or special architectural features.
- Daylight from windows and skylights can provide ambient lighting. Due to the high light levels, some people also use daylight or direct sunlight for visual tasks such as mending or working on puzzles.
- Interior surfaces contribute to good lighting. Lighter colors on ceilings and walls will reflect more light within a space. Dark colors absorb the light and should only be used on moldings or small areas. Ceilings and walls should also have a flat finish for general areas and a satin finish (which is washable) for kitchens and bathrooms.
- Many successful lighting solutions use a combination of all the above.

What constitutes good lighting for us as we age?

- Ambient lighting that is uniform within a room and from one room to another. Why? Because older eyes take longer to adjust to changes in light levels.
- Higher levels of light. Why? Because normal age-related changes within the eye restrict the light coming in and absorb the light – so more light is needed to compensate.
- Glare-Free light. Why? Light scatters within the eye causing an increased sensitivity to glare and the loss of the ability to see subtle details at lower light levels.

As we age, even healthy eyes become more sensitive to glare—they require higher contrasts to see than they did when we were younger. The need for higher light levels also means that control of sources of light is especially important. The recommendations included in this brochure are critically important if ocular diseases, such as age-related macular degeneration or diabetic retinopathy, affect one’s vision, or low vision aids are prescribed by an optometrist to maximize one’s remaining vision.

The combination of regular, comprehensive eye examinations and quality environmental lighting can enhance the visual experience and maintain productivity for a lifetime.

The American Optometric Association, representing more than 34,000 doctors of optometry, optometry students, paraoptometric assistants and technicians, is pleased to support the information contained in Lighting Your Way To Better Vision. As the aging adult population continues to increase in North America, quality lighting’s role in meeting the needs of an aging visual system becomes ever more important.

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Light that helps you distinguish colors. The lens of the eye yellows with age, so proper lighting can help compensate.

Light fixtures that do not flicker or hum, such as the problems caused by older fluorescent lights that use magnetic ballasts. Fluorescent fixtures using new technology with high-frequency electronic ballasts do not have these problems.

Simple modifications to your home can make a big difference

Let’s start outside

Lighting your pathway

Typical porch lights with clear glass and small bright light bulbs can cause glare and make it impossible to see steps or level changes. Pathway lights should be provided between parking areas, or the garage, and the entry to your home. And the general entry area should be lighted to eliminate dark corners and shadows from shrubbery. Energy-efficient long-life bulbs and diffusing lenses are most effective. Automatic controls utilizing photocells and/or motion sensors to turn lights on at the onset of darkness will guarantee the light will always be on when needed.

Making house numbers easy to read

How many times have you tried to find a friend’s home and found it nearly impossible to read the numbers on the front of the houses? Large and lighted house numbers that are white against a dark background will easily solve this problem.

Paying special attention to exterior stairs

A single light source mounted at the head of the stairs may not be adequate to light the entire flight. Concealed rope-lights attached to the underside of the stair rail, or solar powered or electrically powered step lights will provide additional light on stair treads.

Inside, you want to bring the outside light in

If you’ve lived in your home for a number of years, chances are good that the lighting hasn’t changed much since the home was built. You probably have incandescent fixtures…the ones that take the standard light bulbs we’re all used to. Do you know that most of the energy from those bulbs goes into heat while only approximately 10% goes to light, which results in higher operating costs and adds undesired heat to a room? Some simple modifications, such as switching to fluorescent bulbs or tubes, will not only provide better light, but will also help to reduce your utility bills. Today’s fluorescent light technology is far superior to earlier versions – no flicker, no hum, and good color.
Take a moment to look around each room. If you have heavy draperies or valances on the windows blocking the daylight, you can immediately improve the lighting in your home by removing them, and replacing them with woven shades or sheer curtains, which will reduce glare, diffuse daylight and allow light into the room. You can add a separate window covering for privacy in bedrooms and bathrooms. If budget allows, you may also want to consider adding skylights to the living room, kitchen or hobby area. This is a very effective and efficient way to balance the daylight from your windows.

Making living rooms and family rooms more livable

Typically, you use these rooms for visiting with your family and friends, watching television and reading. A good balance of daylight and ambient light, with the addition of some well-placed floor lamps and table lamps will make this space much more comfortable. Special attention should be paid to where the television set is placed, so that there is no reflected light from either the windows or light fixtures. If you use a computer in this room, the same guidelines apply.

Daylight in this condominium has been balanced with ambient light from dimmable hanging fluorescent ceiling fixtures. These fixtures bounce light off the ceiling and provide light downward. This type of fixture is referred to as a direct/indirect fixture.
This computer monitor has been positioned to avoid direct daylight upon the screen. An adjustable task light directs light upon the desk, and not on the screen. A perimeter light valance provides the room with ambient light by bouncing light off the upper wall and ceiling.

**Brightening up the kitchen**

Good task lighting is needed for food preparation, cooking and working at the sink. Since many people must take medication with their meals, appropriate light for reading the labels is also very important.

Adding under-cabinet fluorescent fixtures (with shields to block direct view of the light source) will distribute a glare-free, shadowless light evenly on your work surfaces. An over-the-sink fluorescent light may be recessed, concealed with a valance, or ceiling mounted above the sink. If there is room, you can also place strip fluorescent fixtures on top of the cabinets to reflect light off the ceiling and create an inexpensive, indirect, ambient lighting scheme, which is diffused and glare-free. If there are soffits above your upper cabinets, a light valance may be added to the front surface to provide both indirect ambient light and task lighting for the counter top.

Placing contrasting light or dark placemats or cutting boards on counter tops can make it easier to pour liquids and accomplish other food preparation tasks. Adding a contrasting edge to the counter will also help to define the surface area, and cut down on breakage or spills from “missing the counter.” Cabinet interiors should be white or light in value to aid in viewing the contents.

This kitchen uses a combination of ambient light from fixtures mounted above the upper cabinets, task lighting from fluorescent fixtures mounted under the upper cabinets and halogen task lights focused at an angle across the sink. A rope light mounted on top of the upper cabinets provides low levels of light at night. The two amber hanging fixtures provide light for the bar and add visual interest.

Another example of using skylights to balance the daylight coming from the windows. A task light is positioned for reading. Light fixtures placed above the cabinets provide indirect ambient light at night.

This typical ranch-style home built in the 60’s originally provided only one recessed incandescent down light to light the sink area. Nothing was provided for the counter. A light valance was installed on the existing soffit and the power was re-routed from the single down light to the valance, giving light to the whole length of the counter in addition to the sink.
light required for reading tasks. Care should be taken to avoid glare, and light sources above eye level should be shielded by the fixture or with frosted glass, fabric shades or materials that soften and diffuse the light.

Preventing accidents in the bathroom

A combination of ambient and task lighting will provide you with the best illumination here. The light needs to be bright enough to allow you to read labels on medication bottles, but special care also needs to be given to wall and counter surfaces, which should be of light to medium color value, with matte finishes to reduce glare.

Mirrors are a special challenge. Light sources need to illuminate the individual using the mirror without being reflected in the mirror. If the mirror is wide, a double row of fluorescent tubes in a soffit or valance above the mirror will provide light downward, but will create shadows. The best option is to place lights on both sides, centered at your eye level. This will give you the most complete view of your entire face. An even better solution, if space allows, is to install a separate lighted mirror without a counter in front, which will allow you to stand closer. For those with bad backs or difficulties with balance, having a counter in front becomes an obstacle. A grab bar may be provided for stability.
Bathing areas require extra attention

Sufficient lighting is even more important here since most people remove their glasses while showering and bathing. Lighting must be provided which will not be blocked by the shower curtain or obscured by mist and fog.

Lighting the night time path

For those who get up at night to use the bathroom, an illuminated light switch near the bed and nightlights should be provided for their safety. Warm-colored night-lights should be located low on the wall to light the way. Light levels in the bathroom should be low at night so that your eyes do not have to adjust to bright light and then adjust again to the dark bedroom. Existing incandescent fixtures should be put on dimmers, or additional fixtures added, to provide low light levels at night.

Controls for general lighting in the bathroom may be located outside the door to make it easy to enter an otherwise dark space. Actually, this is a good idea for any room in your home.

Making the bedroom more comfortable

Because many people have trouble sleeping during the night, they tend to nap more during the day. Consequently, they spend more time in bed. Therefore, more activity takes place here, including talking on the phone, watching television, listening to the radio, taking medication, and reading. Moving safely about in the bedroom requires ambient lighting. It is important to balance the daylight and ambient light in the space. This will alleviate eye fatigue, making it easier to stay awake while reading or watching television.

Bedside task lighting should be adjustable. It should be easy to reach while in bed, with controls that are easily accessible (a touch-activated sensor base or easy-to-feel button placed on the bedside table.) Warm-colored fluorescent bulbs are recommended due to the heat produced by incandescent bulbs.
Don’t overlook the closets

It’s very difficult to select what you’re going to wear when you’re looking into a dark closet. A fluorescent fixture should be placed so that light will fall on the front of hanging items and on areas between shelves. Only fluorescent fixtures are recommended, due to potential heat build-up and fire hazards posed by incandescent fixtures.

Making a special place for hobbies

One of the things people look forward to when they retire is being able to spend more time pursuing their hobbies, whether it’s something as simple as sitting in a chair reading or knitting, setting up an easel to paint, or putting together a complete woodworking shop. No matter where the interest lies, it will be much more enjoyable in a safe, well-lit environment. An adjustable fluorescent task reading light may be sufficient for a small area, but wood shops present a bigger challenge. General shop lighting with additional task lighting may be required in these areas, depending upon the tools being used. And it’s very important that fluorescent fixtures in these environments have electronic ballasts to prevent the strobe effect. The old-fashioned magnetic ballast might make a moving blade appear to be stationary.


How to get what you want

We’ve deliberately tried to stay away from using technical terms in this brochure. But when you go to the store, or talk with a handyman or contractor, this additional information will help them guide you in your purchases.

- Ambient lighting: Look for fixtures that are designed to conceal the light bulb/tube from view or have a diffuser to diminish the brightness of the bulb/tube to control glare.
- Indirect lighting: Light that is directed to the ceiling and walls to provide ambient light. Options include fluorescent fixtures installed out of sight, a light valance, wall-wash fixtures or a torchiere.
- Task Lighting: Installed fixtures or portable table/floor lamps with adjustable lighting levels to provide higher light levels in a specific area. Halogen and incandescent task lights are not usually recommended due to the high heat they produce.
- Specifications about fluorescent lighting: When possible, use fixtures with long (48") T-5 or T-8 fluorescent tubes. (T-5 tubes are 5/8” in diameter; T-8 are 1” in diameter) They produce more light for the energy used. Always use high-frequency electronic ballasts in fluorescent fixtures. These ballasts do not hum or flicker like the older and less efficient magnetic ballasts. You should also select the color you prefer: Fluorescent lights are available in a range of color temperatures from warm to cool. A warm color similar to an incandescent bulb is 3000 degrees Kelvin, whereas, a cool color similar to daylight is 5000 degrees Kelvin. 3500 degrees Kelvin offers a good blend between warm and cool. The color rendering index (how true colors will appear) should be 80, or above.
- Paint the walls and ceiling with a lighter color, using a flat finish in general areas, or a satin finish in kitchens and bathrooms. Most paint companies list the light reflective value (LRV) of each paint color either in the index or on the paint chip. Suggested range for the ceiling is an LRV of 80 – 90 and the range for the walls is an LRV of 60 – 80. The higher the number the more light will be reflected.
- Windows and skylights: Daylight within a space should be balanced, either by providing it from more than one direction (from opposing walls or skylights) or by increasing the electric lighting. Windows must have woven shades or sheer draperies to filter the daylight and control glare. Skylights should be made with diffused glass or plastic. Clear glass allows direct sunlight, which can cause glare and create strong shadows.

Planning to downsize?

So far we’ve talked about making adjustments within your existing home. But if you’re planning to move to an apartment or condominium, many of these same suggestions will still apply. You may need to ask your landlord or builder to make some modifications for you. Or, if you’re moving into a retirement community, you’ll need to talk to the management. Don’t assume that the lighting in a retirement community will meet your needs. Be certain to visit both during the daylight hours and in the evening before making a decision. This will tell you how much daylight comes in and also how much lighting is built-in. It is not safe to totally light a living room, family room or bedroom with only portable table and floor lamps since they can not be readily turned on and off with a switch when entering the room. It is also difficult to achieve an even and consistent light level using only table and floor lamps without the space looking like a lighting showroom.

Here are some questions you’ll want to ask about your new home’s lighting.

1. Is there adequate lighting in the parking area, and from there to the entry? Are steps and curbs marked with white or yellow strips to indicate a change of level?
2. Are all steps properly lighted to help prevent falls? Both inside and out?
3. Is the lighting in the corridors even and consistent with adequate light to read the apartment number and get the key in the keyhole? Is there an excessively bright window at the end of the corridor that causes glare? Are corridors carpeted? If the floors are wood or vinyl, has lighting been placed to reduce reflection?
4. How many windows will there be in each room?
5. Is the light pleasant, or does it produce glare? Does the lighting create strong shadows? Is the lighting indirect, filling the space with light, or are the fixtures recessed making the ceiling dark and cave-like. Do they provide balanced light that is even and consistent?
6. Are the light controls for the bedroom and bathroom illuminated with a glowing switch?
7. Where are lights placed relative to mirrors?
8. Is there lighting in the closets?
9. Are fluorescent task lights installed underneath the cabinets in the kitchen?
10. What types of hobby areas are available? What type of lighting is provided?

With just a little planning, some labor, and not a whole lot of expense, you can continue to live in your home, or move to a new place and live in a well-lit, comfortable, supportive, and safe environment that will keep you active and involved in all your favorite activities.
The Center of Design for an Aging Society is a not-for-profit organization dedicated to improving the built environment to maximize the abilities of older adults.

More information about lighting solutions can be found on our website: www.centerofdesign.org

Or contact Eunice Noell-Waggoner, LC
Tel: 503-292-2912.

Additional Lighting and Vision Resources:
Illuminating Engineering Society of North America (www.iesna.org)
American Optometric Association (www.aoa.org)
Lighthouse International (www.lighthouse.org)

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