

STAYING *active* STAYING *safe*

For every person affected by HD, staying active without getting hurt is a balancing act that becomes more difficult as the disease progresses. Studies show that staying active can improve quality of life and help combat depression - a common symptom of Huntington's Disease. During the early stages of HD, safety strategies can be put in place that will keep the person with HD active as long as possible. An occupational or physical therapist can evaluate movement patterns, home accommodations and family roles and suggest ideas that will work for the entire HD family. It is important to note that medications that relieve one symptom of HD may impact movement, thinking, behavior or safety awareness. Talk with a doctor if medications cause drowsiness or hyperactivity, or if they affect the ability to move effectively or perform daily activities.

Avoid Falls

Falls are a major concern for those living with HD. They can be caused by various HD symptoms, so it is important to keep a diary of falls, noting what triggered the mishap.

Many times, simple home modifications may be all that is needed to reduce the number of falls.

- Remove throw rugs and keep hallways clear and well lit
- Use handrails at all stairways and block stairs if needed
- Cushion table corners with child-proofing products or foam rubber
- Place high-backed chairs with padded armrests throughout the house for resting

Bathroom Safety

Making a few modifications can reduce hazards in the bathroom. Before investing in bathroom safety equipment, though, consult an occupational therapist or your nearest HDSA chapter for assistance.

- Remove all electrical appliances from around the sink or shower
- Use only plastic bottles and containers
- Store items most frequently used at an accessible height (throughout the house)
- Use an electric shaver rather than a traditional razor

Kitchen Safety

Preparing food and eating pose special challenges in HD. Forethought can reduce the risks posed by changes in coordination and memory. For example as HD progresses, using a microwave or toaster oven is safer than a stove.

- Non-food items, especially cleaning products, should be removed from the kitchen and labeled with poison stickers (ask your pharmacy). Keep emergency numbers posted by the phone

- Vegetable choppers or food processors should replace sharp knives
- Use oven mitts/pulls when cooking
- Try lidded commuter cups to avoid spills
- Non-skid padding or a damp cloth under plates holds them steady
- Scoop dishes or plateguards, used with large handled or weighted utensils, help control food

Smoking And Firearms

Smoking and firearms pose undue risks and should be avoided by people with HD. Firearms should be removed from the home, as paranoia increases as HD progresses.

If firearms do remain, they should be kept in a locked cabinet with the key kept secure. Smoking poses a risk for fire and burns. Smoking is a habit, though, and quitting may increase agitation. For those who are unable to quit:

- Smoke outdoors or in a well-protected area to reduce risk of fire or burns
- Use fire retardant floor coverings, the smoker's robot and standing ashtrays
- Place smoke detectors throughout the house
- Keep a fire extinguisher handy and charged at all times

Stay active throughout the course of your disease, but be safe as well

About The Authors

Carol Clerico is a registered and licensed Occupational Therapist. She is the senior Occupational Therapist in the Neuroscience Center at the University of Virginia Health System and Occupational Therapist for the HDSA Center of Excellence at the University of Virginia Huntington's Disease Program. John Zenker, a Physical Therapist at the University of Virginia Health System, contributed to this article.