

A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR FAMILY CAREGIVERS

What Caregivers May Need to Buy

*A practical home-care guide for protecting independence, reducing daily friction, and
avoiding preventable disasters*

Adapted from A Survival Guide for the Sandwich Generation

Dr. Tina McMechen

A note before you start shopping

Caregiving has an emotional side, but it also has a shopping list. Some purchases are obvious. Others only become obvious after a fall, a difficult transfer, a ruined mattress, or the umpteenth time you pick pills and crumbs off the floor.

This guide shares the type of items that made the biggest practical difference while I cared for my mother. It is not a comprehensive list, and it is not medical advice. It is the conversation I wish someone had with me at the beginning.

THE POINT: Little things can make a big difference. The right product will not fix caregiving, but it may protect independence while also reducing caregiver strain.

How to use this guide

1. Start with the problem you are trying to solve, not the product you think you need.
2. Ask a clinician, nurse, physical therapist, occupational therapist, pharmacist, or medical-supply professional when fit or technique affects safety.
3. Measure the person, the room, the doorway, the vehicle, or the furniture before ordering.
4. Choose the simplest option your loved one will actually use.
5. Use the product links on my Shopping Checklist page to compare the examples I selected.

1. Mobility

Mobility tools are not only about getting from one place to another. They are tied to identity, independence, and the fear of losing both. Resistance may have less to do with the item and more to do with what the item represents.

FROM MY EXPERIENCE: My mother resisted the walker until I found a zip-up pouch she liked. That twenty-dollar accessory helped the walker fit into her life instead of feeling like a symbol of everything she was losing.

What may help

- A properly selected and adjusted walker
- A walker pouch for a phone, medication, snacks, and other small essentials
- A lift chair that helps the person stand with less assistance
- A lightweight wheelchair or transport chair for travel
- An accessible place to keep mobility devices within reach

Before you buy

- Ask a medical provider or medical-supply professional which mobility aid is appropriate. Do not assume a rolling walker is automatically safer.
- Have the height and fit adjusted for the person who will use it.
- Compare the weight of wheelchairs and transfer chairs against what the caregiver can safely load into a vehicle.
- Check door widths, turning space, seat dimensions, weight limits, and return policies.
- Let your loved one participate in color, style, and accessory decisions whenever possible. Buy-in matters.

SAFETY NOTE: Mobility devices can increase risk when they are the wrong type, poorly fitted, or used without instruction. Ask for professional guidance before relying on one.

2. Transfer

Transfers are where technique, patience, and physical limits collide. The goal is not to prove you can move someone by yourself. The goal is to reduce the chance that either of you ends up on the floor (or even the emergency room).

FROM MY EXPERIENCE: A gait belt is not a magic carpet. It gives you a better grip, but the patient still must use their muscles, and you still need patience. I was not always a shining example of that patience.

What may help

- A gait belt recommended and demonstrated by a clinician or therapist
- A lightweight transport wheelchair for appointments and outings
- A transfer aid recommended for the person's specific abilities
- Stable seating at an appropriate height

Before you buy

- Ask a doctor, physical therapist, or occupational therapist to demonstrate the transfer technique with the actual person receiving care.
- Check weight limits, handle placement, seat width, brakes, footrests, and folded dimensions.
- Consider the caregiver's strength, balance, injuries, and ability to repeat the transfer safely.
- Avoid buying a complicated device without knowing who will teach you to use it.

SAFETY NOTE: A bad transfer can injure both people. If you are lifting, bear-hugging, or improvising, stop and ask for hands-on training.

3. Safety

Safety purchases work best when they support the environment as a whole. One bed rail cannot compensate for a bed that is too high, loose rugs, poor lighting, inaccessible emergency information, or medication scattered across the floor. At one point, my mom had mini-stairs leading up to her “too high” bed. That was a complete disaster! Don’t create one problem when trying to solve another.

FROM MY EXPERIENCE: My mother's original bed was so high that she needed a set of steps to get into it. That was a complete disaster. The winning bed was as low to the ground as we could reasonably get it and adjustable to help her sit up.

What may help

- A bed low enough for safer entry and exit
- An adjustable bed frame or hospital bed when clinically appropriate
- A properly selected bed rail or bedside support device
- Nightlights and clear walking paths
- A wearable emergency-alert device that stays charged and worn
- Grippy socks or other appropriate nonslip footwear
- A secure medication bag plus an up-to-date medication list
- A cordless vacuum for pills, crumbs, coins, cough drops, and other floor hazards

Before you buy

- Remove loose rugs, runners, sharp-edged furniture, clutter, and unstable step stools.
- Test whether the person can reach the alert device and will wear it consistently.
- Keep entry instructions, emergency contacts, and essential medical information easy for responders to find.
- Store medication together and bring the bottles or a current list to appointments.
- Ask whether insurance may cover a hospital bed or other durable medical equipment.

SAFETY NOTE: Bed rails, adjustable beds, emergency devices, and medication systems all carry risks when poorly selected or used incorrectly. Confirm the plan with the appropriate professional.

4. Bathroom

Bathrooms concentrate several hazards in one small space: water, hard surfaces, awkward movements, and very little room to recover from a loss of balance. Practical equipment can protect both dignity and independence.

What may help

- Professionally installed grab bars in the shower or bath area
- A secure support bar near the toilet when the room allows it
- A raised toilet seat or toilet riser
- A shower chair or other bathing aid recommended for the person's needs
- Nonslip surfaces and adequate lighting

Before you buy

- Measure the toilet, tub, shower, doorway, and available turning space.
- Check whether the toilet riser attaches securely and whether armrests are needed.
- Do not treat a towel rack as a grab bar.
- Consider who will clean the equipment and how easily it can be sanitized.

SAFETY NOTE: Ask an occupational therapist or other qualified professional to assess the bathroom when balance, weakness, or transfer difficulty is significant.

5. Personal Hygiene and Comfort

Incontinence products are not glamorous, but they can protect furniture, reduce cleanup, and preserve dignity. Comfort items also need to be realistic: easy to put on, easy to wash, and safe on the floor.

FROM MY EXPERIENCE: No grown adult wants to deal with pads or briefs, but it can be a lifesaver. There are lots of different brands and options from which to choose.

What may help

- Disposable or washable underpads for chairs and beds
- Wearable incontinence products in the correct size and absorbency
- A waterproof, wipeable mattress protector
- Machine-washable clothing with simple fasteners
- Grippy socks or appropriate nonslip footwear
- Compression garments only when recommended for the person
- Zip-up or hook-and-loop compression options when traditional compression stockings are difficult to apply

Before you buy

- Start with small quantities until you know the size, fit, absorbency, and skin tolerance are right.
- Keep a stash of underpads where the person regularly sits or sleeps.
- Choose clothing that can survive frequent washing and is easy for the person or caregiver to manage.
- Ask a clinician whether compression is appropriate and what level is needed before purchasing.

SAFETY NOTE: New or worsening swelling, skin injury, pain, odor, urinary symptoms, or sudden changes in continence deserve clinical attention. Products can manage a problem; they do not diagnose its cause.

6. Cleaning and Laundry

Urine odor can take over a home and make everyone feel defeated. You are not alone if you are sick and tired of smelling pee. The solution is usually a system: contain the moisture, protect the surface, clean promptly, and experiment carefully with products until you find what works.

FROM MY EXPERIENCE: At times it felt like a never-ending rodeo of pee: bedroom, bathroom, living room, and everywhere in between. Experimenting with washable layers, waterproof protection, and odor products was not glamorous, but it made daily life more manageable.

What may help

- White vinegar or another laundry additive appropriate for the fabric and machine
- Laundry sanitizer or odor-removing laundry products
- A urine-specific surface or fabric cleaner
- An air or fabric odor-control product
- A wipeable waterproof mattress protector
- Disposable gloves and cleaning cloths
- A cordless vacuum for the areas around the favorite chair and bed

Before you buy

- Read product labels and test cleaners on a small hidden area first.
- Never mix cleaning chemicals unless the labels explicitly state that the combination is safe.
- Check fabric-care and appliance instructions before using hot water, soaking, additives, or extra rinse cycles.
- Clean the source rather than trying to cover the odor with fragrance.
- Use waterproof layers that can be wiped and fully dried before remaking the bed.

SAFETY NOTE: Never combine bleach with ammonia, vinegar, or other cleaners. Follow every product label and ensure adequate ventilation.

Quick shopping checklist

Use this list to identify the next problem worth solving. You do not need to buy everything at once.

- ☐ Mobility aid professionally selected and fitted
- ☐ Walker or wheelchair storage pouch
- ☐ Lift chair or stable raised seating
- ☐ Lightweight transport chair
- ☐ Transfer technique and gait-belt instruction
- ☐ Low, accessible bed or approved adjustable bed
- ☐ Appropriate bedside support or bed rail
- ☐ Grab bars and bathroom safety equipment
- ☐ Raised toilet seat or toilet riser
- ☐ Emergency alert device and charging routine
- ☐ Nightlights and clear walking paths
- ☐ Underpads, wearable products, and mattress protection
- ☐ Simple washable clothing and nonslip footwear
- ☐ Medication bag and current medication list
- ☐ Cleaning, laundry, and odor-control supplies
- ☐ Cordless vacuum for recurring floor hazards

Ready to compare products?

I created a categorized Shopping Checklist with example products and purchase links. Some are affiliate links, which means I may earn a small commission at no additional cost to you.

[Visit Dr. Tina's Shopping Checklist](#)

A FINAL REMINDER: Buy for the actual person, actual room, and actual caregiver in front of you. The best product is not the most expensive one. It is the one that safely solves a real problem and will actually be used.

Want the rest of the story?

This guide was adapted from *A Survival Guide for the Sandwich Generation: Balancing Parents, Children, Work, and Yourself* by Dr. Tina McMechen. The complete book blends practical guidance, hard-won lessons, and the emotional permission caregivers rarely receive.

[Learn more about the book](#)

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