



Older Individuals who are Blind
Technical Assistance Center

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Lesson 14: Managing Everyday Housekeeping Tasks

Introduction

Most people do cleaning and home-maintenance tasks daily, ranging from daily activities like doing the dishes to less frequent activities like changing a light bulb or air filter. Consider the tasks you did around the house independently before vision loss. Have you found adaptations for any of those tasks? Do some cleaning tasks seem impossible without good vision? Managing household tasks may seem overwhelming for people who are newly visually impaired. However, the adaptations for successfully performing most of these tasks are simple and based on principles you are already familiar with, like using other senses, organization, and overdoing the job.

Do you have difficulty telling if the kitchen counter or sink needs cleaning? Do you wonder if the floors are thoroughly swept? If you have questions about managing your home, you will find this lesson helpful and encouraging. The skills needed to do each of these tasks are found in the Toolbox you learned about in Lesson 3. This lesson describes how to use nonvisual techniques and any remaining vision to complete homecare tasks successfully.

Perhaps you have found you don't want to do some home-maintenance tasks anymore or have hired housekeeping assistance. That's a choice many people consider. This lesson will provide the tools and information you need to do any tasks you prefer to complete independently or when a housekeeper or handyman is unavailable.

Lesson Goals

- Learn to clean small, horizontal, and vertical surfaces without using vision
- Be able to sweep and mop floors using appliances and furniture as landmarks

- Know how to make a bed using the mattress, box springs, and head- and footboards to center the linens
- Know how to plug appliances safely into electrical outlets
- Be able to change lightbulbs safely in table lamps
- Be able to operate large appliances, including the microwave, stove, dishwasher, washer, and dryer by labeling strategic dial positions

Cleaning Horizontal Surfaces

Think about all the small, flat surfaces in your home. For example, visualize the kitchen. There may be countertops, glass-top stoves, tops of small appliances, and a kitchen table. Think about other rooms in your house. Most furniture has at least one flat horizontal surface that needs to be cleaned.

Most people learn to clean with mainly visual approaches, but these strategies are not effective for people who are blind or have low vision. Even if an individual has some usable vision, they may not feel confident in how effectively they can clean using their vision. Adaptive methods for basic cleaning require skills learned in previous lessons, including the sense of touch, the grid pattern, overlapping movements, and body-sized space.

You can use your sense of touch to tell where a surface is dusty, sticky, or unclean. You can also use it after cleaning to make sure nothing was missed. It's important to note that some health conditions decrease sensitivity in one's fingers and feet. People with neuropathy or decreased sensitivity may not find it helpful to use touch to determine cleanliness. In these cases, a person can clean an area thoroughly and skip checking their work.

Body-sized space refers to an area about the width of your body that you can easily reach without moving your feet when cleaning. If you are blind or have low vision, break up large areas that need to be cleaned into body-size spaces that you tackle one at a time to ensure every section gets cleaned.

The grid pattern and overlapping movements go together. Divide a body-sized space into several small grids. Making overlapping circular movements, clean first in one direction (left to right) and then clean the same area in the opposite direction. A long counter, large table, or floor can be divided into several body-sized spaces. Landmarks like appliances, furniture, drawers, and cabinet doors can help break up the surface into sections as well.

Before cleaning a table or counter, it's strongly recommended that all items be removed from the surface. Taking this precaution can prevent knocking over a glass or breaking a dish. This precaution is recommended for people with all vision levels because lack of contrast, glare, or limited peripheral vision can cause items to be overlooked.

You can locate items using the manual searching method discussed in a previous lesson. To search a countertop, make a loose fist and put it on the counter's front edge. Move your hand slowly in a front-to-back pattern. When you come in contact with something on the counter, remove it to a safe location. Continue in the same direction until you reach the back of the counter and have removed everything. Repeat this pattern using overlapping movements until you've cleared the entire area. Now it is safe to clean the counter.

The wall at the back of a counter acts as a buffer that prevents you from knocking things off the counter and onto the floor. When you are cleaning a table, you must modify this technique because there is no buffer. For small tables, put your free hand at one edge of the table to serve as a buffer. Move your other hand in a loose fist toward your buffer hand, searching for things on the table. Repeat this pattern until you've searched the entire table. A large table may need to be divided in half. The center of the table can serve as the buffer. Begin on one side and move your loose fist toward the center. Then begin on the other side of the table and move toward the center, removing any items you find.

An adaptive method you can use when you start to clean is to spray the cleaning product onto the cloth rather than directly on the surface of what

you're cleaning. This method lets you control the amount and direction of the cleaner. Begin cleaning in one corner and, using a grid pattern, move from left to right or right to left. Repeat the pattern, making certain the cleaning cloth overlaps on each pass.

Cleaning Vertical Surfaces

Adaptive methods for cleaning vertical surfaces, like mirrors, windows, or glass doors, are similar to horizontal surfaces. Use a grid pattern to divide a surface into small sections, use overlapping movements in alternating directions, and spray the cloth instead of the mirror or door's surface. Mirrors can be divided into two sections. This technique can be done by starting in the upper left or right corner. Clean halfway across the mirror and then begin in the opposite corner and clean the other half, overlapping in the center to ensure the entire mirror is clean. You can use your non-dominant hand to mark the place that is being cleaned as a guide. Some people prefer to use items, such as the cleaning-product bottle, to mark the sectioned-off area's edge.

Sweeping and Mopping

Cleaning floors can be done with some simple adaptations. Instead of spot cleaning based on a visual scan of where a floor is dirty, you'll need to clean the entire area systematically. You can do this similar to how you clean a table or other surface. Divide the floor into body-sized spaces, using landmarks like the refrigerator, stove, sink, table, mop bucket, or cleaning-product bottle. Each section should be about the distance your arms can reach easily with a mop or broom. When cleaning a table, use overlapping movements in a grid pattern to thoroughly clean the floor. The main difference is that the overlapping movements will be the broom's width rather than the hand's width.

For example, if your dishwasher, sink, and a corner cabinet are side-by-side along one wall of the kitchen, you would begin by sweeping just in front of your feet toward the dishwasher. Then take a half-step forward—smaller than the width of the broom—and repeat. The broom strokes will

overlap with the previous strokes. Continue to repeat the technique until all of the debris is swept in front of the dishwasher and sink. Then, sweep the debris toward the corner and collect it in the dustpan. Continue this pattern until the kitchen is swept.

If your kitchen is long and narrow, try sweeping all the debris along one side and into a corner to pick it up in a dustpan. If your kitchen has a large center area, you may need to sweep one side and then the other. Use appliances and cabinets along each side as body-sized landmarks. Use the same technique described above but reach as far as is comfortable for you into the center of the room and sweep toward each side's landmarks. Then sweep the debris into a corner to pick up in the dustpan. When you are finished, you can mop the corner to remove any debris left, or, if you can bend over safely, hold onto the counter with one hand, use the upper protective technique with the other arm, and wipe the area with a damp paper towel.

Many people prefer to use a vacuum or electric broom rather than manually sweeping the floor. The same techniques of using a grid pattern and overlapping strokes can be used for vacuuming. Use landmarks to break up space into body-sized areas to make sure the whole floor gets covered.

You can mop using similar techniques. Sponge mops and floor cleaners that use disposable pads, like a Swiffer, are often easier for people to control than a traditional rag or string mops. The same concepts of sectioning off the floor with landmarks and then cleaning in a grid pattern will ensure that every part of the floor is clean. If you use a mop bucket, make sure to keep it out of the way to prevent tripping over it and consider using it to help section off areas of the floor.

You could use other patterns for cleaning, but most people find the grid method most effective. However, it may be helpful to experiment with other patterns to see what works best in each area of your home. It may be that cleaning in concentric circles works better than a grid pattern in some areas.

Making a Bed

Few adaptations are needed to make a bed. The primary difference is using tactile (rather than visual) methods to identify the direction the bedding goes and making sure it is even. Start by identifying the characteristics of the beds in your home. Do any have headboards, footboards, or side rails? Is the bed pushed against a wall on one side, or are you able to walk around both sides? It's easier to make a bed if both sides can be accessed.

Marking and identifying linens were discussed briefly in Lesson 9. If your home has multiple beds or differently sized beds, you need a way to organize and label your bedding. Even if you have only one size or one bed, marking is helpful if multiple bedding sets are hard to tell apart. In addition to marking, another way to avoid mismatched sheets is to wash each set separately as they are removed from the bed and fold them together. Protective bags can be used to keep sets of sheets or coordinating bedding together.

Markings can also be used to tell which direction bedding should be placed on a bed. For example, if it is difficult to tell the top side of a bedspread from the bottom, put a small safety pin on the center's underside at the bottom. This adaptation will also make it easier to center the bedspread on the bed. Safety pins, buttons, or tags can also be used on sheets to mark the short or long sides. Tactile cues can differentiate between items within a sheet set, so marking them is probably unnecessary. The fitted sheet has elastic around the bottom, and the top sheet has flat corners. Sheets, blankets, and comforters all have different thicknesses and textures.

To make bedding fit symmetrically on a bed, use tactile cues to locate the top edge of a sheet; it may have a decorative seam or ruffle that you can align with the top edge of the mattress. Using landmarks and tactilely gaging distance, pull the top sheet and other bedding sides to hang evenly along the bottom of the mattress, box springs, or side rails. Some people prefer to tuck the linens under the foot of the bed, while others leave them loose.

Plugging into Outlets

You will probably need to plug electronic items into an outlet from time to time, like reading lamps, razors, hairdryers, radios, Talking Book players, blenders, phone chargers, coffee makers, or the vacuum cleaner. Everyone should be careful when plugging something into an outlet, and this task can be performed safely without vision.

Visualize an outlet as you read the following description: A typical wall outlet is designed for plugging in two appliances, one above the other. Most outlets accommodate three-prong plugs. The most common orientation for a grounded (3-pronged) receptacle has two vertical slots above the hole where the third longer round prong inserts. Some newer electrical codes now require receptacles installed in the opposite orientation with the one round hole at the top and the two narrow slots underneath.

You can explore an electrical outlet using your sense of touch. To prevent shocks, always plug items in with dry hands. Start at the top of the outlet and trail down the outlet cover. You will feel that the center, where the prongs will be inserted, is either slightly raised and flat or indented in the areas of the narrow slots. Feel the areas where the prongs are inserted and note the orientation of the holes. Next, take the plug and orient the prongs in the direction you will insert them. Hold the plug in your dominant hand and use your other hand as a guide. Place the guiding hand on the receptacle, locate the holes for one of the receptacles, move the guiding hand to the side, just past the holes, and then line up the plug and slide it into place. You can put a bump dot or other tactile marking on the outlet cover next to each receptacle to act as a guide.

Two-pronged plugs sometimes can only be inserted one way. Newer plugs have one straight prong and a second prong that widens or fans out near the end. This type is a safety prong that goes into the left slot if the round hole is on the bottom. If the round hole is on the top, the wider slot will be on the right. Another feature of a typical 2-pronged plug is the plastic raised edge that protects fingers from the prongs. Examine some small appliances in your home and note this safety feature on the plugs. Any time you plug in an appliance, make sure your fingers are not touching the metal prongs

and are safely behind the raised edge.

If you have low vision, you could buy outlet and light switch covers in colors that contrast with the walls. Or you could outline the raised edge on the outlet covers with contrasting electrical tape. Take your time when practicing plugging in appliances. Consider pulling up a chair so you are not bending over for an extended period. With practice, you can feel confident plugging in the appliances you want to use.

Replacing Light Bulbs

Most people, whether visually impaired or sighted, do not have trouble replacing a light bulb. If a bulb burns out when you turn on a lamp, it's probably cool by the time you gather the necessary tools to replace it. Make sure you know what type of bulb and what wattage is appropriate for each lamp or fixture.

First, make sure the light is off or unplugged. Remember to use the upper protective technique as you bend over to remove the plug from the wall. Locate the lamp's base and trail up the lamp until you locate the socket with the burned-out bulb and lampshade. For some lamps, you will need to remove the shade. If you have some usable vision, consider taking the lamp to a well-lit location to do this task.

Trail up the lamp once more and grasp the socket base with one hand and the lightbulb base with the other. Never hold the bulb by the glass because it could break in your hand. Firmly hold the socket as you turn the bulb to the left. Remember the saying, "Left to loosen and right to tighten." You may choose to discard the burned-out bulb before removing the new one from the packaging, as doing so will prevent you from mixing them up.

Locate the base of the socket with your non-dominant hand. Put your index finger on the top edge of the socket. Hold the new bulb where the glass and screw meet. Touch your index finger with the tip of the screw and gently slide it into the open socket. Turn the bulb to the right until it tightens. Replace the lampshade and plug the lamp into the electrical outlet.

LED bulbs may cost more than CFL or incandescent bulbs, but they last

many times longer, do not contain mercury, and do not cause heat build-up. Because they are solid and have no filament, LED bulbs can withstand jarring, vibrations, and cold weather.

Halogen bulbs have some similarities to incandescent bulbs but produce a brighter white light that is more efficient per watt. However, they are more expensive and produce enormous heat—as much as 300 degrees. These bulbs emit a level of UV rays that can cause sunburn if you sit under the lamp too long. They are not generally recommended because of these hazards and should not be used in children's rooms. They can cause a fire if they come in contact with flammable material.

LED bulbs are often most effective for people with low vision because they come in many colors. People with functional vision may find that different colors enhance or impair their vision. Refer to the lesson on maximizing vision with non-optical devices to use light to enhance usable vision.

Operating Large Appliances

Most people who experience blindness or low vision later in life can rely on their previous experience operating appliances to cook or do laundry. However, if you don't know where the markings indicate the water's level and temperature or the settings for various fabrics, you can't operate your washer. If you can't read cooking times on the microwave, you can't reheat leftovers. Aspects of marking were discussed in Lesson 9, and using kitchen appliances was covered in Lesson 13, but consider what other home appliances are difficult to operate due to vision loss.

Before asking someone to help you label appliances, decide what you need to know. It can be tempting to label more than necessary, creating confusion. For example, do you need to label every setting for the burners on the stove? On an electric stove, high may be at the 2:00 position on a clock face. Medium-high may be at 4:00, medium at 6:00, medium-low at 8:00, and low at 10:00. By remembering this, you may not need to mark anything, or you may only mark medium and a few other settings. You may want to get raised-print letters to label the settings on the digital panel of

your oven. Read Lesson 13 for more information on this.

If your washer has dials and high contrast is helpful for you, try using brightly colored tape, so the markings stand out. Most people do not use all water levels and all three temperature settings. Decide which you use often. If you don't use every type of fabric setting, only mark the ones you use. Other laundry adaptations will be discussed in Lesson 15.

Consider which home-maintenance tasks may be hard due to unreadable labels or indicators. You may want to adapt other systems, including your security system, thermostat, water heater, and breaker box. As previously discussed, there are numerous ways to adapt appliances; some involve maximizing low vision with high-contrast color markings, while others are tactile or auditory. Bump dots and other tactile markings are often used on appliances and electronics. One of the more versatile stick-on marks is called Loc-Dots. These are small, clear stick-on labels with a raised dot in the center, similar to the raised dot on the Number 5 on a landline phone. They work well on dials, number pads, keyboards, and other appliance controls.

If you are comfortable with technology or have no functional vision, consider auditory ways to identify appliance settings. There are numerous talking devices, like thermostats or appliances with screen reader accessible apps. New appliances are sometimes able to be controlled through a wireless connection to a smartphone app. What if you could turn your oven on to the exact temperature you want while in the other room? What if you could change the temperature of the air conditioning while away from your house? These conveniences are increasingly available and can often be controlled using voice commands on smartphones or smart home devices.

Safe Use of Cleaning Products

There are important safety tips to keep in mind when cleaning. Recommendations like using protective techniques when bending over were reviewed in previous lessons. The following safety tips apply

specifically to using cleaning products.

First, make sure each product is easily identifiable using the organizational and labeling methods described in Lesson 9. In addition to knowing what each product is, it is important to know how much to use and how materials can be used safely. You wouldn't want to damage a stone countertop or have the finish on a piece of furniture discolored.

Also, be aware of what harmful chemical interactions can occur if cleaning with more than one product and which products should not contact the skin. Wearing rubber gloves is a good safety precaution for many cleaning products. Gloves may prevent you from gathering some tactile information, but you can remove your gloves to feel for missed spots once an area is cleaned. Some people prefer to use inexpensive, environmentally friendly options for cleaning, like vinegar. Although you should check on the care instructions as not all options can be used on every surface.

Another safety tip is to wear protective eye gear when using cleaning products in spray bottles. As mentioned previously, it's easier to spray a product into a cleaning cloth rather than directly on a surface. Hold the cleaning cloth a few inches from the sprayer. This technique gives you better control of the spray.

Keep in mind, if children live in your home or visit frequently, make sure any cabinets that contain dangerous cleaning products are locked. Keep all hazardous products out of reach of children.

Summary

This lesson provided adaptive methods for basic home maintenance tasks and approaches to complete tasks independently. Examples were provided, but many other tasks and methods for accomplishing them could not be covered. As you begin using some of the techniques provided here, you will discover other ways of doing household tasks that may work better for you. You won't know which strategy will be most effective until you try. Be safe and keep trying different techniques. Experimenting with your ideas will strengthen your problem-solving abilities.



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Suggested Activities

Try the following suggestions to start implementing what you learned in this lesson:

Practice using the grid pattern with overlapping strokes on a clear section of your kitchen countertop. Clean a small section thoroughly.

Identify which furniture, appliances, and cabinets can be used as landmarks in each room to section off the floor.

Organize and label your cleaning supplies so that you are familiar with locating and using each one.