

4.4.1 Environmental factors

“Physical environments that are age friendly can make the difference between independence and dependence for all individuals but are of particular importance for those grower older”

World Health Organisation 2002¹¹

Queenslanders enjoy a relatively healthy physical environment. We have one of the safest food supplies in the world, the overall quality of our air and drinking water is good, and the built environment is generally clean and healthy. The quality of the physical environment cannot be taken for granted however, because there are regional differences.

Population health status is influenced by the interaction of social, economic and environmental health determinants.⁸⁵ The biological, physical and chemical environments have the potential to impact on health. The extent of this impact is modified by the scale and nature of human activities. Societal, household and individual environmental conditions directly relate to people's health. As societal factors impact on all the population, they are reported in the *Whole of population* chapter. Environmental indicators of specific relevance to older people are reported in this section.

Housing

In 2001, the vast majority of older people in Australia lived in private dwellings (92.8%), while a small percentage (7.2%) lived in non-private dwellings such as nursing homes or aged care hostels.⁸⁶ Nearly two thirds of Australia's older people (62%) live in family households, usually with their partner.⁸⁷ In 2001, 34% of peoples aged 65 years and older lived alone. More than two thirds (70%) of those who live alone were female. Recent trends such as low fertility, smaller families, higher incidence of childlessness and increased divorce rates, have meant the number and proportion of older persons living alone has increased and is likely to increase in the future.⁸⁸ Over the thirty years to 2001, the proportion of older persons living alone in Australia increased from around one in five to one in four.

In 2001, the vast majority (81.4%) of Australians aged 65 years and older owned their own home, including 3.9% with a mortgage.⁸⁹ Housing tenure are directly linked to cardiovascular and all-cause mortality, with people in rented accommodation having higher death rates than owner occupiers, even after other socioeconomic variables are considered.⁹⁰ Many Queenslanders on low incomes or with complex needs are not having their housing needs met by the private market. About 62% of low income renters were able to meet their need in the private market in 2001. Moderate affordability need was experienced by 17% with rental payments ranging between 315 and 40% of their income. The remaining 21% had greater need. This pattern is similar to the Australian average.⁹¹

Housing involves both a site (dwelling) and a situation (neighbourhood). The location, physical quality, level of overcrowding and cost of housing all impact directly on health.⁹⁰ Like marital status, the living arrangements of older people are important because they are closely linked to income, health status and availability of caregivers. Many older people experience social isolation as a result of their living arrangements. Sometimes a lack of accessible services, facilities and housing forces older people to move out of their home and away from their local area and social networks. This can be very disruptive and can contribute to an older person's social isolation, with potential health implications.²⁰

In 2001, the majority of older Queenslanders rated their housing as adequate based on a number of criteria (Table 4.14). Housing adequacy ratings by older males were similar to older females. Older Queenslanders were significantly more likely to rate adequacy of their housing higher than all adults, for the majority of dimensions. Distance from public transport was rated as the least satisfactory feature of housing for both males and females. Only 76% of the older population perceived the distance as adequate, in contrast with five other housing characteristics. Access to services normally used was the second least satisfactory aspect of housing, with older people rating this aspect of their housing lower than the total population.

Table 4.14: Percentage of persons who rate adequacy of housing (95%CI), by selected aspects and age, Queensland 2001

	Male	18+ years Female	Persons	65+ years Persons
Living space	89.4 (89.3-89.5)	89.3 (89.2-89.3)	89.3 (89.3-89.4)	96.8 (96.7-96.8)
Number of bedrooms	91.2 (91.7-91.8)	91.3 (91.3-91.4)	91.6 (91.5-91.6)	96.8 (96.8-96.9)
Comfort	94.3 (94.2-94.3)	93.4 (93.4-93.5)	93.8 (93.8-93.9)	98.2 (98.1-98.2)
Distance from public transport	74.8 (74.7-74.9)	74.2 (74.1-74.3)	74.5 (74.4-74.5)	76.3 (76.2-76.5)
Access to services normally used	84.5 (84.5-84.6)	84.2 (84.1-84.3)	84.4 (84.3-84.4)	83.9 (83.8-84.0)
Housing needs in general	94.8 (94.7-95.0)	93.7 (93.6-93.7)	94.2 (94.2-94.2)	97.9 (97.9-98.0)

Source: HILDA 2001

Household safety devices

In Queensland in 2001, one third of older person households (33.5%) had anti-slip surfaces or strips in the bathroom compared with 26.2% of all households (Table 4.15). One in four older person households (26.5%) had handrails fitted in the bathroom or toilet, compared with 9.8% of all households. Anti slip and handrail features in bathrooms and toilets are recommended but not required by law. Seventy percent of older person households had floor rugs or mats compared with 25.9% of all households. There was little variation in the prevalence of safety features in older households outside Brisbane, compared to households in Brisbane region. Older person households in Queensland were similar to other households in the percentage of smoke detectors installed and percentage with adjustable hot water.

In 2001, the majority (73.5%) of older person households had smoke alarms or smoke detectors fitted, slightly more than not older person households (Table 4.15). Since 1994, installation of hard-wired smoke alarms has been a requirement in new dwellings constructed in Queensland. Almost half (49.5%) of older person and all Queensland households have adjustable hot water thermostats fitted. Since 1997, hot water tempering devices must be installed in the hot water delivery system to bathrooms in all new domestic dwellings in Queensland. In 1998, two thirds (67.9%) of all Queensland households reported having a circuit breaker on the electrical system in their home.

Table 4.15: Percentage of older person households reporting safety features, Queensland 2001

	All households	Older person households(a)	Not older person households(a)
Anti-slip surfaces or strips in bath or shower	26.2	33.5	21.9
Internal or external steps or stairs with guards or gates	70.2	70.4	70.1
Smoke alarm or smoke detector	69.1	73.5	66.5
Handrails fitted in bathroom or toilet	9.8	26.5	n.a.
Floor rugs or mats	25.9	70.0	n.a.
Adjustable hot water thermostat	48.6	49.5	48.2
Resident with first aid training & CPR during the last 3 years	33.1	20.6	40.4

Source: ABS Safety in the home 2001

(a) older persons are aged 60 years and older, and are usual residents of the household or visitors who visit once a week or more often.