

Could a Smart Home Help You Age in Place?

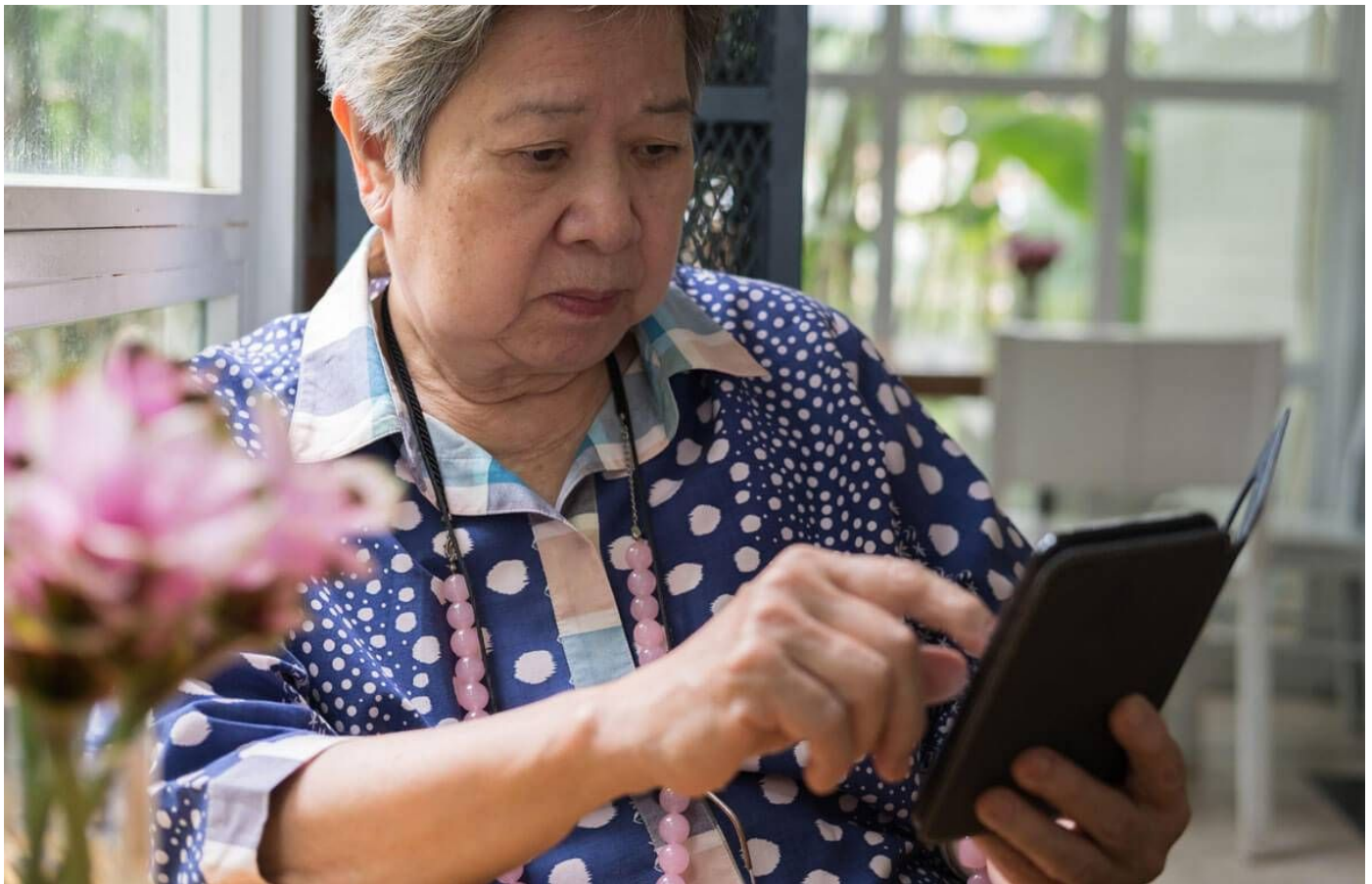
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June 26, 2019

A tour of The Thrive Center reveals four innovative products

In the heart of Louisville's Innovation District sits the Thrive Center, a 7,500-square-foot space dedicated to showing how technology can enhance the lives of older adults. And in the center of the center is the prototype of a smart home — including kitchen, living room, bedroom and bathroom — that demonstrates how technology can [help older adults age in place](#) and allow their caregivers and loved ones to keep a virtual eye on them.



Credit: Adobe

I visited the [Thrive Center](#) recently for a tour with executive director Sheri Rose, who talked about why aging in place will become increasingly important as more and more boomers need care.

After my visit to the Thrive Center, I can easily see how a combination of standard and special-purpose technologies can increase safety for older adults and offer peace of mind to their loved ones.

According to Rose, one of the issues will be affordability of facilities. "When you look at skilled care today, it's about \$9,000 to \$10,000 a month, but when you look at 2040, it's projected to be \$18,000 to \$20,000 a month," she says.

Prices like that make the home's \$2,600 Samsung smart refrigerator seem like a bargain to me.

Rethinking Aging Technology

Often, our conception of aging-in-place technology doesn't extend past the LifeAlert medical alert pendant, which gave us the familiar tagline "I've fallen, and I can't get up!" back in 1989. But much has changed in 30 years. After my visit to the Thrive Center, I can easily see how a combination of standard and special-purpose technologies can increase safety for older adults and offer peace of mind to their loved ones. And all for less than the cost of a month in a skilled-nursing facility.

Here are four innovations which could impact the future of aging in place (some are available now, some are not):



1. Samsung Family Hub™ Refrigerator

Smart refrigerators are typically marketed to families on the go, but they can be just as useful to older adults who are staying put. How? For one thing, inside is a camera that lets you view the contents from anywhere with an internet connection. That means a loved one could check to see if there's any food in the fridge or if that gallon of milk has been moved in a week.

But what's on the outside may be even more important. The door of the [Samsung Family Hub™ Refrigerator](#) includes what is effectively an oversized tablet PC that can serve as a command center for [Samsung's SmartThings home-automation system](#). Prices start at approximately \$2,700. It can also connect to Billy, the next technology Rose showed me.

2. Billy

Australia-based [Billy](#) uses Samsung SmartThings sensors and proprietary software to create a home-monitoring system for older adults that learns a person's habits and sounds the alarm — actually, triggers a smartphone alert — when those habits change. The basic kit includes six battery-operated sensors that track room temperature, movement, motion and opening and closing doors. The kit costs \$279, which includes three months of service. From there, service is \$60 per month, without a contract, and can be canceled at any time.

In the Thrive Center kitchen, sensors silently note when the refrigerator or a cabinet has been opened and when someone walks through the living room. The idea is to [let caregivers monitor older adults without spying on them](#) — and without having to play detective each time they visit the home. "Walking into someone's home for most caregivers is kind of a private-eye experience," Steve Hopkins, the company's former CEO, told me in a later phone interview.

(Billy, by the way, was named after the founders' grandfather's dog. As the website explains, "As their grandpa got older — and they couldn't always be with him — they often felt like his dog, Billy, knew more about how he was doing than they did!")

Billy is expected to hit the commercial market in the U.S. later this year.

3. Samsung Induction Cooktop

Another appliance in the Thrive Center kitchen is the [Samsung Induction Cooktop](#), which only gets hot when a pan is in place — and doesn't get as hot as a traditional cooktop. Again, [aging in place isn't the main reason such cooktops exist](#), but Rose thinks they can help protect older adults who might trip and put a hand on the cooktop to steady themselves.

"I always think of my mother, who will park her walker to the side," Rose said. "She's going to feel her way along her countertops all the way to the kitchen." With an induction cooktop, she's unlikely to sustain a burn.

Induction cooktops,, which start at approximately \$1,800, have advantages and disadvantages, as spotlighted in [this story in Consumer Reports](#).

4. Luna Lights

Another product that does focus on older adults, whether they live at home or in a congregate-care facilities, is [Luna Lights](#), which combines a pressure-sensitive pad on the bed with wall-mounted path lights. Luna Lights is set up in the Thrive Center's bedroom and bathroom.

Here's how the product works: When a person gets out of bed at, say, 2 a.m. to use the bathroom, the lights come on automatically; when he or she returns to bed, they automatically go off. "It's fully automated," CEO Donovan Morrison told me later by phone. "There's nothing to wear, no buttons to press."

Luna Lights currently works with about two dozen senior-living facilities and there are plans to release a home-based version later this year. Morrison said client sites have seen reductions in nighttime fall rates of 29% or better, which is important given that falls are the leading cause of fatal and non-fatal injuries among older Americans, according to the National Council on Aging.

But path lighting is just part of what Luna Lights offers. (Otherwise, why not just use nightlights?) Like Billy, it learns people's habits and can alert caregivers if those habits change. The idea is that someone who suddenly starts making six trips to the bathroom each night might have [a urinary tract infection or another health condition](#), something caregivers need to know. Loved ones can also receive an alert if a person gets out of bed and doesn't return after, say, 20 minutes.

"The majority of falls happen in the middle of the night when people get up to go to the bathroom," Rose said. "You want to find them right away because what you hear so often is they lie there all night."