

UPDATE YOUR HOME FOR A



LIFETIME OF LIVING

By Randy Weigel

As Americans grow older, they want to remain in their own homes.

According to an AARP survey, more than eight in 10 people age 45 and older – and more than nine in 10 of those 65 and over – say they want to stay where they are for as long as possible. Many homes are designed for young, able-bodied adults and do not take into consideration needs of older residents.

Consider Universal Design Options

Universal design is an approach to space and products that are more comfortable, accessible, and easy to use for people of any age, size, or ability. A well-designed home, or one modified to accommodate the needs of residents of all ages and abilities, can promote independence and the satisfaction of being able to stay in control – in one's own home – as one ages.

Essential universal design features include:

- At least one no-step entry into the house, either through the front, back, or garage door.
- Entryway doors that are 36 inches wide, interior doors with widths of 34 to 36 inches, and passageways

(an area common to multiple rooms) measuring 42 inches wide.

- Light controls, electrical outlets, and thermostats reachable for a person in a seated position.
- Three-foot wide hallways free of hazards and steps that connect all rooms on the main floor.
- Lever-style door handles and faucets that do not require grasping or twisting to operate.

Mobility Around the Home

Mobility is the first thing with which many older people have problems. A bedroom or sleeping area on

a main level is convenient for guests or family members unable to climb stairs and is a good place to recuperate following an injury or illness. If there is no bedroom on the main level, consider how an office or family room might double as a bedroom with the use of a sofa bed. An alternative is to install a stair lift that can assist persons with mobility issues to move to different levels in a home. Hardwood floors offer easier maneuvering than carpet for wheelchairs or walkers. If using throw rugs, make sure they are slip-resistant with a low knap.

A full-sized bathroom on the main level is a good idea. A powder room won't work for those who use walkers or wheelchairs. Guests will need a 5-foot circle of open floor space for maneuvering between bathroom fixtures (see Figure 1 next page). If building a new bathroom, have the builder install solid blocking in the walls for future grab bar installation. Locate grab bars in strategic locations throughout the bathroom.

If possible, position the laundry on the main floor and opt for front-end loaders as convenience for those using wheelchairs. If the existing home does not allow enough space



Passageways at least 42 inches wide are among suggested universal design features.

for maneuverability, or if interior doors are narrower than 34-36 inches, consider transport chairs that are narrower than regular wheelchairs.

A poorly designed kitchen is difficult and frustrating, even for the most dedicated, energetic cook. An older adult may find working in such an environment too taxing and miss out on the enjoyment of cooking and entertaining. A universally designed kitchen includes lighting from as many different sources as possible: natural, under cabinet, track, recessed, and task lighting. A center island with plenty of space around the island accommodates cooks with different physical conditions. Consider a side-swing, built-in wall oven, adjustable height sink, accessible storage with pantry cabinets that pull out, lazy Susan, and deep storage drawers.

Transition from Indoors to Outdoors

Getting in and out of a house safely can pose difficulties for many older adults, so focusing on steps, ramps, and pathways is important.

Steps: Several steps are actually safer than one step; a gently sloping walkway is better still. Different-sized steps used together are also dangerous since they interrupt the normal rhythm of a person's gait. Handrails should be on both sides of the stairs. Handrails not only help steady the balance when walking down stairs but offer leverage when ascending. People with walkers or severe mobility problems find a 4-inch rise is easier to maneuver than the standard 7-inch height.

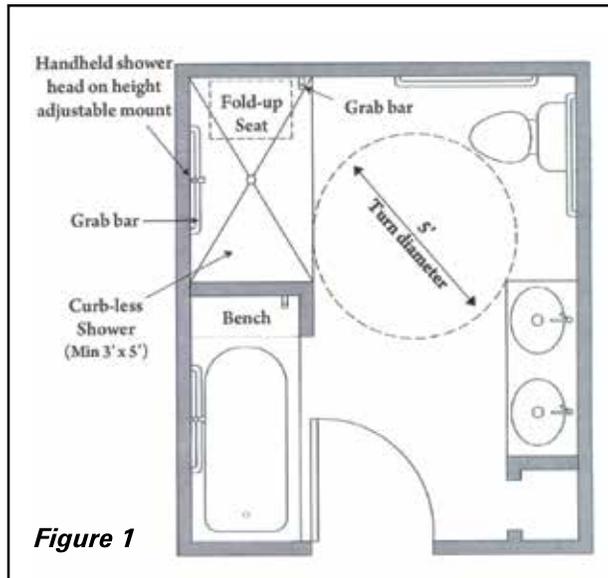


Figure 1



Ramps ease accessibility for those with mobility issues.

Ramps: If one has mobility issues, an accessible ramp can be designed for both beauty and safety with features including nonslip flooring, handrails, and light fixtures for nighttime use. If an accessible ramp is not practical, another option is a stair lift. Portable ramps allow easier movement on multi-level decks and in and out of the home.

Pathways: The easiest paths are made of concrete. These paths can be coated to resist weather and to be slip proof. They can also be made with designs etched directly into the concrete. Gravel is another path

product that is easy to use, but it can be more difficult for people using wheelchairs. Borders are needed to keep material in the path. Sawdust and wood chips are not recommended since these materials are harder to navigate with a wheelchair or stroller.

Give Your Home a Checkup

Although some of these suggestions may not be practical or economically feasible for everyone, have you checked if your home will accommodate the changes that come with age? It's not a bad idea. You make sure your home is protected against break-ins and make them safe for visiting grandchildren, why not make them more comfortable and convenient to accommodate the normal age-related changes that inevitably occur?

For more information, visit:
AARP – www.aarp.org/

housingresources for home improvement, universal design, aging in place.

National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) – www.nahb.org for contractors and remodelers, home remodeling, universal design.

National Resource Center for Supportive Housing and Home Modifications – www.homemods.org for frequently asked questions on home modifications, assistive living, finding architects and contractors.

Center for Universal Design at North Carolina State University – www.design.ncsu.edu/cud for universal design features, products, and resource bibliography.

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