

Aging In Place Or How To Never Leave Home

By [Susan Bresler](#)

One of the newer trends among the graying population is known as Aging-In-Place or A.I.P. Many people no longer want to retire to a warm climate, they would rather remain, at least part of the year, where their children and extended family are, more specifically, they often want to remain in their own home. This is the first in a series of articles about ways to prepare a home for ease of lifestyle over an extended time span.

In family situations where this may be the case, it makes sense, when undertaking any renovation, to look for ways to design which will allow an aging occupant to adapt the home more easily as circumstances change.

The most common places where problems occur are bathrooms, kitchens and paths of travel, including stairs, doorways, and other areas where changes in elevation occur, such as garage to house, or front entries.

This article will look at bathrooms. Obstacles here can include the type of handles on fixtures, ease of getting up and down from a toilet, the general slipperiness that water can cause and steps or curbs into tubs or showers. Preparing a bathroom to accommodate a wheelchair or walker is also worth thinking about when renovating.

Some solutions are extremely easy. All faucet companies have extensive lines of ADA approved faucets. Lever handles provide the ability to turn on and off easily, even with the wrist, if hand strength is diminished. Faucets come in top of the line styles and finishes, and can be used in the bathroom at any time. Lever handles are also a good idea on doors.

One of most useful (and easy) ideas is the installation of reinforcement in walls for the future placement of grab bars. Grab bars are typically located adjacent to and behind toilets and around showers or tubs, and the reinforcement usually consists of a piece of plywood or metal firmly attached to the studs along a length of wall, usually between 32" and 38" off the floor for a horizontal bar, hidden behind the tile.

If you're changing the door, you might want to consider the opening width. A "usable" door that will accommodate a wheelchair needs a 32" clear opening. This can usually be achieved with a 2'-10" door installed in a standard manner.

Space is needed not only to open and get through doorways, but also to turn around, and to manipulate from the wheelchair onto the toilet, into a tub or shower, or under a sink. Accessibility Guidelines have been set over the years through Federal acts, and these guidelines provide excellent standards when looking at design solutions. A wheelchair basically occupies 30" x 48" of space, so it is considered that a circle with a diameter of 5ft (60") is the right amount of clear space to allow for a wheelchair to turn around, whether in the U of a U-shaped kitchen or in a bathroom, and an area of 30" x 48" should be provided in front of any fixture where a wheelchair would have to go. The orientation would depend on how the person would be approaching the fixture.

In this situation, sinks can either be installed in a countertop, without a base, or with retractable cabinet doors, to allow a user to slide in under the sink. A minimum width of 2'-6" is needed, with 3' being a more optimal width. Cabinet manufacturers have whole lines of cabinetry tailored to meet the increasing need for accessibility, both in the kitchen and the bath.

A toilet should be placed where there is a minimum of 33" between a wall and the nearest fixture, with the toilet itself 1'-6" from the wall to allow the most efficient use of a grab bar along the side for assistance if desired. Most toilet fixture manufacturers now produce toilets known as something like "comfort height" which have the seat equivalent to a chair, higher than the traditional toilet, which are easier for sitting and rising for any age.

Lastly, let's talk about tubs and showers. If floor space below a shower area allows, a shower can be recessed so that its entry is flush with the bathroom floor for roll-in access. "Wet area designs", in which the shower floor doubles as the entry to the tub, can use space in a very efficient manner, and basically allows a tiled portion of a room to act as a shower. Trench drains at the edge of the tiling can prevent water from escaping. If a shower cannot be recessed, nor a "wet area" desired, there are collapsible rubber water barriers, which will allow a wheelchair access into a shower, while keeping water in, although this is not as desirable a solution. Minimally, a shower should be 36" deep to minimize uneven surfaces and should allow sufficient space to accommodate grab bars and a seat, so that a person can use the facility in a comfortable and safe manner.

This article is meant to be an introduction to some solutions to common issues that arise in homes as the occupant's age, and the writer suggests that you contact your architect or contractor for more specific information about the possibilities in your home.

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