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# KITCHENS & Baths

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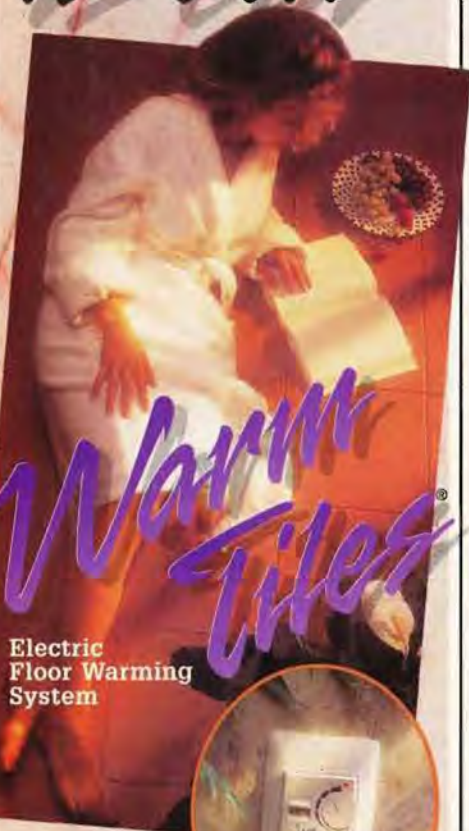
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## Changing Needs

Tips for creating an accessible bathroom.

**Problem:** My mother, who has limited mobility, recently moved in with me, and I need to make the bathroom more accessible. What features and issues do I need to consider? Do I have to remodel the entire bath, or are there products I can add to make it safe and accommodating?

• **Look for long-term solutions.** A total remodeling will give you more flexibility in terms of adding features. However, there are some simple things you can do without reconstructing your existing bath. "Typically, in any bathroom, there are accessories you can add to make it more accessible," says architect Joshua Zinder, AIA, of Cold Spring, New York. Temporary solutions aren't ideal, he points out, but are often appropriate until you get the funds for a total overhaul.

Zinder recommends putting up grab bars, sold in 8-inch increments for easier installation, in the wall studs, near the tub and the toilet. Removing vanity doors below the lavatory can be practical for someone seated in a wheelchair. Install a handheld shower and folding seat to the tub or shower.

• **Pay attention to the individual.** "The first step is to find out the biggest concerns of the person. Different people can do different things," says Zinder. "One of the first things I do is to measure the person's reach in front, above the head and out to the side."

An occupational therapist familiar with the individual's condition and future prognosis will help you make



Architect Joshua Zinder redesigned this bathroom for his father, who has limited mobility. The design won an Easy Access Housing Award in 1996.

smart decisions from the beginning. "Talk to a qualified designer and talk to the medical personnel working with your mother," says Mary Jo Peterson, CBD, CKD, of Mary Jo Peterson Inc. in Brookfield, Connecticut, who is an instructor for the National Kitchen & Bath Association on this subject.

• **Open up the doorway.** "You have to consider how the person will approach and move through the door. Sometimes the solution is a pocket door," says Peterson. You might opt for an easy-to-grasp lever handle or a door that springs shut with a simple push. Many entry-

ways can be expanded or relocated by borrowing space from an adjacent room or hallway.

• **Choose flooring carefully.** Wet floors are slippery no matter what the material. Peterson recommends asking your flooring retailer for the slip-resistance rating of the particular floors you're considering. The higher the number, the more slip-resistant the floor is. If you want a ceramic tile floor, opt for smaller tiles with more grout lines. Stay away from throw rugs, carpeting and anything else your mother might trip over.

• **Add grab bars.** You'll find all sorts in various shapes, colors and materials. Guidelines call for at least one 42-inch-long grab bar alongside the toilet. One option is to select a bar that folds down from the wall. Proper installation is key. "Grab bars must be installed carefully so that they can withstand 250 pounds of static pressure," says Peterson. Otherwise they may be pulled out of the wall rather than support someone who is falling. Towel bars are not safe grab bars. Peterson says she specifies a marine grade or using regular plywood for reinforcement.

• **Consider the essentials: sink, tub, shower and toilet.** These are the basics of a bathroom, and they need to be comfortable and easily accessible. An experienced professional bath designer should be able to guide your product selection. A pedestal or wall-hung lav offers a seated user legroom but might not be necessary in your case. Any exposed plumbing should be covered or padded to prevent leg injuries to seated users. For someone with limited hand and arm mobility, an automatic faucet or one with a single-lever design is a suitable option.

Make sure faucets and tub fillers are up to today's codes and offer pressure-balancing valves and temperature controls to avoid accidental burns. A seat is an ideal feature in nearly all tubs and showers. You'll find some that fold up and down and are unobtrusive when not in use. The seat, like grab bars, must be properly reinforced.

A new toilet may or may not be necessary. "You want the height of toilet to be the same level as the wheelchair from which the person is transferring," says Peterson. Manufacturers offer toilets with 18-inch-tall seats, a typical height for individuals transferring from a wheelchair. Peterson uses risers that go between the existing toilet seat and bowl to raise the seat in some of her projects.

• **Special features.** "The person needs to be able to get into the bath and move around its confines safely," says Peterson. Automatic lights that operate via sensor are ideal in accessible baths. Round the countertop edges. Make sure cabinet doors and drawers can be opened and shut by the user, and that their contents can be reached. The goal is to create a bath in which everyone can be independent and safe.

—Allison Murray Morris

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