

## Home Safety for People With Disabilities

*Translated into plain language by Helen Osborne of [Health Literacy Consulting](#)  
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Home safety is important in our daily lives, although it may not be something we often think about. People of all abilities need to prepare for any unplanned events that could occur, even in the safety and comfort of their home or community.

Home safety is even more important for people with disabilities and mobility impairments.

There are many ways to be safe at home. For instance, you could add extra safety features, make an emergency checklist, or modify rooms so they are more accessible. Here are some facts to know and things you can do.

### Safety in Bathrooms

People who use wheelchairs or walkers need bathroom doorways that are at least 32 inches wide (wider than most doorways).





Sometimes people replace the whole door unit.  
(These ideas can be used in other rooms too,  
not just the bathroom.)

People with limited mobility or balance

problems may find it hard to transfer from wheelchair to bathtub. To help, you might add:

- Grab bars
- Transfer seats
- Nonslip tub mats
- Bench that extends outside the bathtub
- Swivel-style shower seat
- Roll-in shower.

Sinks that allow wheelchair access sometimes expose plumbing pipes. These pipes need to be boxed in or covered with insulation to prevent burns. Here are more ways to make bathrooms accessible to people with disabilities:

- Sinks, toilets and shelves that can be raised or lowered (to different heights)

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- Sensor or lever-type faucets (for people who have trouble grasping with their hands)
  - Toilet flush extensions and toilet paper clamps (for people with upper-limb loss)
  - Anti-scald temperature controls (for people with little feeling in their fingers or toes).



### **Safety on Stairways and Ramps**

Many deaths from home injuries are due to stairs and steps. Here are ways to be safer:

- Make sure stairway handrails are installed the correct way. Most

handrails should be able to support 250 pounds. They should be screwed into studs or blocking, not sheetrock. Handrails should be placed about 1½ inches from the walls on both sides of the staircase so people can firmly grasp them. Handrails should extend beyond the top and bottom so people have support

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when they get on and off the last step. Sometimes people add a handrail in the center when a staircase is very wide.

- Make sure there is good staircase lighting. This means that there is no glare or shadows.
- Keep stairways clear of extra objects. Outside steps should be kept clear of ice, snow, and leaves. Make sure there are no cracks, loose bricks or stones on outside steps.
- Put safety gates at the bottom and top of each staircase when there are toddlers and young children.
- If you build a staircase, make sure the tread (width of step) and riser (height of step) are the correct size. Risers should not be more than 7 inches. Treads should be wide enough so that feet do not extend beyond the edges of steps.
- Do not place throw rugs at the bottom of staircases as they may cause people to trip and fall. If you must use throw rugs, secure them with carpet tape or skid-resistant backing.
- Inside and outside ramps should have a slope no greater than 1 inch of height for each 12 inches of length. Ramps bigger than this may cause problems for people in wheelchairs or those with limited mobility. As with stairways, ramps

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should have handrails and be free of extra objects. The ramp surface should be nonslip. For wooden ramps, this can be done with nonskid deck paint or adhesive strips. On concrete ramps, a broom-finish (side-to-side across the slope) can help.

## **Safety in the Kitchen**

Kitchens are often the most used room in a person's home. They also can be the most dangerous. Make sure your kitchen meets your needs – you need not just accept a “standard” kitchen design.

Your kitchen should focus on safety, mobility, accessibility and comfort. Make sure that wheelchair users and others with limited mobility can move around in ways that are easy and safe. Here are some ideas to help.

For stoves, stovetops and ovens:

- If you have a stovetop (rather than stove), you might want to lower the counter to 28 inches high. This way, you can see what is inside the pots. You might also

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want to add a “pot-filler” behind the stovetop that allows you to add water while pots are on the stovetop (no need to carry filled pots from sink to stove).

- Choose ovens with knobs or push-button controls on the front. This way, you do not have to reach across burners. Staggered burners can help prevent burns when cooking with many pots and pans.
- A mirror installed above the oven would allow you to watch food as it cooks.
- People with limited upper-limb strength might prefer ceramic cook-tops or flat-surface burners so they can simply slide pots and pans. Pan holders can keep pots in place while stirring.

Other ways to be safe in the kitchen:

- Measure the wheelchair from front to back, plus footrests. Know its turning radius (how much space it takes to turn). Most wheelchair armrests are 29 inches from the ground. This is important to know as counters must be at the proper height (this often is 28-34 inches from the ground). People using electric scooters may need more space than those in wheelchairs.
- There should be enough knee space under the counters for wheelchair users and those who need to sit while working. Knee space should be about 30 inches

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wide, 27 inches high and 19 inches deep. Make sure this space gives you enough height and depth for knee and toe clearance.

- Add rolling storage carts if you lose storage space due to accessibility needs.
- Have nonskid floor surfaces.
- Place a kitchen-grade fire extinguisher where it is easy to reach.
- Kitchen sinks should be shallow (5-6 inches deep) and equipped with a loop or single-lever faucet. A long hose or sprayer can help when filling pots with water.
- People with visual impairments may prefer smaller work spaces with all appliances close by. Make sure the pathway for bringing in groceries is short and straight.
- Place dishwashers, refrigerators and ovens at useful heights. For instance, people who have trouble bending might want the dishwasher high so it is easy to load.

More ways to make kitchens accessible:

- Wall ovens
- Side-by-side refrigerators

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- Adjustable countertops
  - Lapboards (make it easier to prepare food)
  - Folding or pull-out surfaces (such as cutting boards)
  - Tall stools or adjustable chairs
  - Sling belts attached to the counter (to help you stand more securely)
  - Hangers for glassware and cups
  - Lazy Susans (spinning shelves) for corner cabinets
  - Suspension systems that make it easier to pull out drawers with heavy items.

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