

Home Modifications

Home modifications are changes made to adapt living spaces to meet the needs of people with physical limitations so that they can continue to live independently and safely. These modifications may include adding assistive technology or making structural changes to a home. Modifications can range from something as simple as replacing cabinet doorknobs with pull handles to full-scale construction projects that require installing wheelchair ramps and widening doorways.

The main benefit of making home modifications is that they promote independence and prevent accidents. According to a 2000 AARP housing survey, “89% of older Americans want to stay in their current homes for as long as possible,” but other studies show that most homes are not designed to accommodate the needs of people over age 65. A house that was perfectly suitable for a senior at age 55, for example, may have too many stairs or slippery surfaces for a person who is 70 or 80.

How Can I Tell What Home Modifications are Right for Me?

The best way to begin planning for home modifications is by defining the basic terms used and asking some simple questions. According to the Rehabilitation Engineering and Assistive Technology Society of North America (RESNA), home modifications should improve the following features of a home:



- **Accessibility.** Improving accessibility means making doorways wider, clearing spaces to make sure a wheelchair can pass through, lowering countertop heights for sinks and kitchen cabinets, installing grab bars, and placing light switches and electrical outlets at heights that can be reached easily.
- **Adaptability.** Adaptability features are changes that can be made quickly to accommodate the needs of seniors or individuals with disabilities without having to completely redesign the home or use different materials for essential fixtures. Examples include installing grab bars in bathroom walls and movable cabinets under the sink so that someone in a wheelchair can use the space.
- **Universal Design.** Universal design features are usually built into a home when the first blueprints or architectural plans are drawn. These features include appliances, fixtures, and floor plans that are easy for all people to use, flexible enough so that they can be adapted for special needs, sturdy and

reliable, and functional with a minimum of effort and understanding of the mechanisms involved.

Where Do I Begin?

Before you make home modifications, you should evaluate your current and future needs by going through your home room by room and answering a series of questions to highlight where changes might be made. Several checklists are available to help you conduct this review. The National Resource Center on Supportive Housing and Home Modifications is a good place to start. Go to the center's website at <http://www.homemods.org/resources/pages/safety.shtml> and view the "Safety for Older Consumers checklist."

In addition, Rebuilding Together, Inc. has an excellent home modification checklist at: <http://www.rebuildingtogether.org/content/resource/detail/1192/>

You can begin your survey by examining areas of your home. Here are some questions to ask:

Appliances, Kitchen, Bathroom

- Are cabinet doorknobs easy to use?
- Are stove controls easy to use and clearly marked?
- Are faucets easy to use?
- Are there grab bars where needed?

Doors, Windows

- Are your doors and windows easy to open and close?
- Are your door locks sturdy and easy to operate?
- Are your doors wide enough to accommodate a walker or wheelchair?
- Do your doors have peepholes or viewing?

Electrical Outlets, Switches, Safety Devices

- Are light or power switches easy to turn on and off?
- Are electrical outlets easy to reach?
- Are the electrical outlets properly grounded to prevent shocks?
- Are your extension cords in good condition?
- Can you hear the doorbell in every part of the house?
- Do you have smoke detectors throughout your home?
- Do you have an alarm system?
- Is the telephone readily available for emergencies?
- Would you benefit from having an assistive device to make it easier to hear and talk on the telephone?

Floors

- Are all of the floors in your home on the same level?
- Are steps up and down marked in some way?
- Are all floor surfaces safe and covered with non-slip or non-skid materials?
- Do you have scatter rugs or doormats that could be hazardous?

Hallways, Steps, Stairways

- Are hallways and stairs in good condition?
- Do all of your hallways and stairs have smooth, safe surfaces?
- Do your stairs have steps that are big enough for your whole foot?
- Do you have handrails on both sides of the stairway?



- Are your stair rails wide enough for you to grasp them securely?
- Would you benefit from building a ramp to replace the stairs or steps inside or outside of your home?

Lighting, Ventilation

- Do you have night lights where they are needed?
- Is the lighting in each room sufficient for the use of the room?
- Is the lighting bright enough to ensure safety?
- Is each room well-ventilated with good air circulation?

Once you have explored all the areas of your home that could benefit from remodeling, you might make a list of potential problems and possible solutions.

- Are all appliances and utensils conveniently and safely located?
- Can the oven and refrigerator be opened easily?
- Can you sit down while working?
- Can you get into and out of the bathtub or shower easily?
- Is the kitchen counter height and depth comfortable for you?
- Is the water temperature regulated to prevent scalding or burning?
- Would you benefit from having convenience items, such as a handheld showerhead, a garbage disposal, or a trash compactor?

Where Can I Learn More About Home Modifications?

Mentioned as a resource earlier in this fact sheet, the National Resource Center on Supportive Housing and Home Modifications (NRC SHHM) is one of the best sources for more information about home modifications. The center is a major clearinghouse for news on government-assisted housing, assisted-living policies, home modifications for older people, training and education courses. Visit the center's web site at <http://www.homemods.org>.

Some area agencies on aging (AAA) have programs or link to services that assist older people obtain home modifications. You can call the Eldercare Locator at 1-800-677-1116 or visit the website <http://www.eldercare.gov> to locate your local AAA.

