

Things to Consider When Building, Buying, or Remodeling Your Accessible Home

By Rick Lorenz

As a person who is been in a wheelchair for the last 13 years, I can speak with some authority on this issue. My particular disability is not only in my legs, but also in my hands which makes it particularly problematic. Let me start with saying some of the things that you definitely want to consider in order to maintain your independence. So, let's discuss accessibility issues:

ENTRY

You will need to get into your house, so you are going to need a ramp of some sort. One of the hard parts of remodeling an existing home is this very issue. If you're coming into the house through the garage you may not have enough distance or "run" to get a ramp that is not too steep. Any ramp should have railings on both sides to keep you from running your wheelchair "off into the ditch". Too steep of a ramp could cause your wheels to spin when you're going uphill and could cause you to fall out of your chair forward going down the hill.

A ramp on the outside of the house could have snow and ice issues but could be easier for the length of "run" necessary so that the ramp is not too steep.

DOORWAYS

Some wheelchairs are extra wide so you may need doors and doorways that could be 3'6" wide. Generally, however, 3-foot-wide doors work well. A really sweet upgrade would be power-operated doors to open and close.

It isn't just getting in the house where you need to deal with these types of issues. Think about the back patio or the back deck. How would you access those and be able to use them? Take a look at the tracks on the sliding glass doors. Those are usually too high for a power wheelchair but could work just fine for a manual chair.

BATHROOMS

Getting around in a bathroom can definitely be a challenge. Grab bars are ultra-important, but you need to know what height from the ground best works for you. As you get older you will realize that those grab bars should be a little bit

higher than what the “standard” says. Also, equally important, realize that there are a couple different diameters for grab bars. You need to determine whether you want the smaller or the larger diameter grab bars. Also, any grab bars must be screwed into the studs or 2 x 6 backing behind the drywall and/or tile.

Some people like a vertical grab bar by the toilet while others simply like the horizontal grab bar. They make toilets in different heights, and I recommend the tallest ones. However, they even make a 4-inch riser that sits on the floor and then the toilet sits on the riser for even more height.

Mobility getting into and out of a shower is probably the most dangerous. I think I read somewhere that 75% of falls occurred in the bathroom. In the shower be sure to have that “sandpaper type” tape on the floor and just outside the shower as well. If you have a throw rug, make sure it is rubber-backed and not slippery.

Typically, a handheld shower wand that can be both raised and lowered is what is used. And on the wall, a soap/shampoo/conditioner dispenser is important. A shower seat is a must, but you definitely do not want one that is too low as it is very difficult to get up from that.

KITCHEN

Mobility in the kitchen is also important. You need to be able to get into the refrigerator and get into the freezer from a wheelchair. You need a microwave oven that is low enough that you don’t have to try to stand up to use it. They now make cooktops that can go up and down for those that still have good use of their hands. Similarly, access to one that is lower would be a big help for somebody who is in a wheelchair but does still maintain good hand strength and coordination.

OTHER EQUIPMENT

Most everybody works on a computer of some sort whether it be a laptop, desktop, or tablet. Be sure you have good access to your Wi-Fi equipment, your television equipment, including your cable box, etc. So often those things end up getting hidden behind the couch, the recliner, the coffee table, etc.