

“MAKE BATHROOMS SAFER, EASIER TO USE FOR ALL”

remodeling

SPECIAL
REPORT

5.1.13

Make Bathrooms Safer, Easier To Use for All

Universal design concepts open a world of possible improvements.

Bathrooms can be hazardous to your health—the statistics prove it.

Every year, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, about 235,000 people over the age of 15 come to emergency rooms with injuries that happened in the bathroom, and 14% of them, almost 33,000 people, are hospitalized. Injuries increase with age, and for all ages, the most accident-prone activities were bathing, showering, and getting out of the tub or shower.

"Falls can be fatal for seniors," says Doug Walter, an architect and certified aging in place specialist with the Centennial, Colo., firm, Godden/Sudik. "Anything we can do to prevent that, we should."



ADVERTISEMENT



ADVERTISEMENT

Curbless showers are not only useful for wheelchair users or homeowners who may need a walker; they are also beautiful and easier to clean. Hand-held shower heads on an adjustable slide make showering convenient for users of different heights.

By applying the concepts of universal design—products and a built environment that accommodate users of all abilities—a lot of these hazards can be ameliorated.

Consumers don't have to forego aesthetics in their quest for products that address some of the sensory losses and decreased mobility often attendant on aging. Considering that 90% of Americans age 50 and older say they prefer to stay in their homes as they grow older, according to AARP, there is a large—and ever-growing—market for universal design.

Three of the biggest trends in universal design are curbless (zero threshold) showers, taller toilets (aka comfort height toilets), and layered lighting to eliminate glare. These features provide convenience and safety across all age levels. None of them suggest disability or reflect an institutional look.

"When universally designed bathrooms are done well, it's not obvious, and the best of it is invisible," says Mary Jo Peterson, head of a design firm in Brookfield, Conn., specializing in kitchens and baths. "If it's obviously just a solution to a problem without beauty, it's not universal design."

"No-threshold showers have begun to take hold with not just designers, but with builders and consumers as well," she says, and they "are of benefit for everyone, not just for those who have to roll into a shower."

These type showers use a trench style or linear drain rather than a central drain, and from a remodeler's standpoint, that means the shower floor only need slope

BEAUTY
WITHOUT
BARRIERS

View Accessible Bath Products

AQUATIC

in one direction rather than two, which also makes it possible to use larger tiles on the floor, opening up greater design opportunities, Peterson says.

For seniors who still want to have a bath, there are tubs with a door in them that are perfectly presentable, adds Walter.

In the shower, flip-up seats, grab bars, and hand-held shower heads on a vertical slider are other conveniences that serve people with a range of abilities. A seat offers a place to rest or a safer way to trim toenails or shave legs than trying to perform those tasks while leaning against a shower wall or bending down with one foot propped up on the shower curb.

"While grab bars scream old to most people, they don't have to look institutional," Peterson says. There are companies making some fun and funky grab bars, and manufacturers are also working harder to incorporate support in other products, like towel bars and even soap dishes. For homeowners who steadfastly resist the notion of grab bars, Peterson advises putting the necessary blocking in the walls behind the tile so that the bars easily can be added at a later date if needed.

"The big trend in toilets is the comfort height," which adds a couple of inches to the traditional toilet, says Walter. Just by looking at a toilet, no one can see that it's comfort height, but in use, its advantages are immediately apparent, especially to anyone with ailing or aging knees.

"The other nice development is the bidet seat; all they need is power to heat up the water. These are great for seniors who may have trouble with hygiene," he adds, but they are also a real boon for homeowners of any age.

Providing adequate lighting for the tasks at hand benefits everyone, but especially for those in the 40-plus age range, since it's around age 40 that people begin to notice the diminution in vision that aging brings. At age 60, people need three times the amount of light as they did at age 20, says Walter, and most homes are woefully underlit.

Especially in a bathroom, where people are performing tasks like shaving, putting on makeup, and taking medications, a mix of task lighting and soft overhead lighting can eliminate glare and make it easy to accomplish those tasks. For safety's sake, Walter strongly recommends some form of daylight in a bathroom, through either a window or a solar tube. He also likes to use motion sensor lighting in a bathroom, and advocates the use of dimmer switches to control light levels, and rocker switches, which don't require the fine motor control needed to operate other types of switches.

Other universal design features include:

- No-touch faucets
- Lever handles instead of door knobs
- D-ring or loop pulls on cabinets and drawers, or soft close mechanisms, which can be operated with a push
- Counters with knee space beneath for sitting and/or wheelchair access
- Low-sheen or honed finish on floors to reduce glare
- Wide doorways for ease of access

Employing universal design concepts and products in a bathroom will not only create a convenient and beautiful space for homeowners to age in place, but will also make their homes welcoming and safe for visitors of all ages and abilities.—*Kate Tyndall*

