

ADAPTING YOUR HOME

Did you know that more than 10% of the Irish population has a disability?

Here we provide a guide to making a home accessible for people with disabilities, to provide disability access you may need to adapt entrances and exits, modify bathrooms and kitchens to ensure that they are safe for disabled people and how to avoid slips, trips and falls by choosing the best floor surfaces.

Disability assessment



Professional assessment

The domestic requirements for people living with a disability should always be assessed by a professional, usually via an occupational therapist (OT) from a hospital or social services. This is particularly important when a person is about to come home from hospital for the first time as they may need adaptations, such as grab rails or half-steps.

Occupational therapists (OTs) are the most qualified people to give advice, and can even offer assistance with planning the adaptation and liaising with architects and other professionals.

If the changes that need to be made are extensive, it is likely that you will have to wait longer to have them approved and carried out.

Advice for people with disabilities

There is a lot of help available, from small gadgets that can help someone to be more independent and safe to major adaptations in the home. None of these major alterations come cheap, so it is important to get all the free help you can before you start spending.

The best place to start is social services or talking to an association that looks after the specific disability that you or the person living with you has.

If you are not in touch with social services, then you can contact your local council's housing or environmental health department who may have facilities or budgets to help and sometimes they are the route into social services if you haven't already got anyone allocated.

Another good route for finding out what help is available is at support groups for the relevant condition - health or social services professionals can often supply details. These can be a great source of information.

Funding for disability adaptations

Either social services or your local environmental health department may be able to offer you a disabled facilities grant, for some of the necessary home improvements.

Some work, such as installing ramps or a lift between floors, can be done at zero-rated VAT. This can save

on the cost. If you employ someone who is not aware of this, make sure you get the information you require so that you can reduce any costs you might have to pay out.

It is worth thinking about what will happen if you are likely to move at any time. If you are staying where you are, then make the changes you need with the best material you can afford, such as concrete for wheelchair ramps. If, however, you know you will be moving, it could be better to fit wooden ramps that can be easily removed.

Top tips for adapting your home

Whatever the disability, here are some simple adaptations that will make a big difference:

Make rooms as light as you can - and ensure lighting levels are consistent throughout the home.

- Fit long-lasting bulbs that don't need changing as often.
- Decorate with light colours, using a matt rather than a shiny finish.
- Use décor to highlight areas where there are obstructions or a change in level.
- Fit smoke and carbon monoxide detectors, preferably with alarms or other devices to grab attention. The fire service offers a free home safety check and will give free smoke detectors to some clients.

Access



Simply getting in and out of many houses can be difficult for people with limited vision, poor mobility or dementia. Most homes have steps to external doors. You'll need to think about access from the front and back of the property for every-day use and in case of an emergency such as a fire.

Ramps

If you or your family member has limited mobility or poor vision, try to create either a permanent or portable ramp to the front door. When creating a ramp, make sure it is at the right gradient and not too steep. You will also need to consider having resting places on longer ramps for wheelchair users who are self-propelling.

Ramps should also have a non-slip surface with a 10cm upstand to all exposed edges to help prevent the wheels going over the edge. Handrails are helpful. The width of the ramp is also an important consideration, especially if a turn is to be included.

There must be a 1.2m square landing platform at the top and bottom. A slightly ribbed surface can help people to get up the ramp more easily. Gradients for a ramp to get over a height less than 2m are recommended to be 1:15 and nothing less than 1:12, even for portable structures. So if you have a height of 15cm to overcome, you should be considering a ramp that is about 2.25m long.

If this isn't possible, you can go less than this if required - but it really depends on the level of disability and how difficult it is to get into the property. If in doubt, get professional advice.

A ramp is also helpful for anyone on crutches, who uses a walking frame, is unstable on their feet or with poor sight or dementia. Of course, they may not need the gradient required for wheelchairs, but taking away the danger of falling is paramount.

Disability access inside the home

Once in the home, people should be able to move around easily, from room to room and ideally upstairs and down. It is important to reduce the number of floor level changes as much as possible, using ramps where necessary.

It is important to keep the number of changes in floor level to a minimum, using ramps where necessary.

For those in a wheelchair, keep corridors free of any clutter and, if possible, allow a clear width of 90cm for people to pass. For those that need help moving around, either provide a walking aid or a grab rail for support on steps or beside a bath/toilet where transfers need to take place.

Fit handrails at a height that suits the individual - get an assessment from a professional such as an occupational therapist.

These are normally fitted where there are steps, or at convenient places around the home that allow the person to rest as they move around.

Stairs - stairlifts and handrails

If you have enough space, the best way to adapt the home is often to provide everything the person with disabilities needs downstairs.

If this isn't possible, then there are lots of ways of making the stairs safer:

- Add handrails to provide support.
- Ensure the carpets on the stairs are completely secure to reduce the risk of trips and falls.
- Check that the lighting is good enough to be able to see each step.

Alternatively, consider adding a stairlift or lift. There are two main types of stairlift - those you can sit on and those that have a plate for you to stand on. A specialist will come and fit one for you. They cost from €1,800 to buy or you can rent one for €12 a week, plus an installation charge. You can get reconditioned ones for less, but make sure that they have at least a 12-month guarantee and have been reconditioned professionally.

Doorways

For most people in a wheelchair, it's easier to manage a doorway opening rather than a door itself, or at least a sliding door - opening doors with handles can be difficult. Doorways need to be at least 75cm wide to allow access for a wheelchair.

Make sure that any steps within the doorway are minimised. This can be done by using mini ramps so that there is less likelihood of getting stuck or tipping over. It is also worth attaching kick plates onto the doorframes so that less damage is caused by the inevitable knocks and bumps.

Attaching kickplates to doorframes reduces the damage caused by wheelchairs

For someone who is mobile but needs help moving around the home, then it is essential that the doorway is wide enough to get two people through at a time. This may be a standard 75cm width or more, but again get a proper assessment done to see if it's worth widening.

If you are looking after someone with dementia, you need to think about how you can secure - or leave open - doorways. In some circumstances, it may be better to have a lock on doors to certain rooms such as basements.

It is also important to check doors that are self-shutting or lockable, as these can be confusing for people with dementia. They can get scared and shut in, sometimes trying to find another way out, such as through the window, which can be dangerous. Try to avoid locks on the outside of internal doors as people with dementia can accidentally lock their carer in.

Specific disabilities

For more information about specific disabilities, such as blindness or Alzheimer's, contact the leading society

or charity in that area.

Flooring

Getting the right type of flooring is vital to avoid trips and falls and to help people feel confident in their own home. Different surfaces suit different people - the needs of someone who uses a wheelchair are quite separate from someone with impaired vision, so we have suggested the best type of flooring for some of the most common disabilities.

Best type of flooring for different disabilities		
Type of disability	Type of flooring required	Example
Blind	Easy to hear people coming	Well-laid laminate or timber, at a consistent level
Dementia	Pattern free	Carpets, vinyl (all plain), at a consistent level
Hard of hearing/deaf	Ease of cleaning if they have a hearing dog	Vinyl or laminate flooring
Poor mobility on legs	Easy to see, seamless, non-slip	Well-laid laminate, vinyl, carpet
Wheelchair	Easy to use and durable, seamless	Well-laid timber, laminate or vinyl

Adapting kitchens for disability



Lower worktops can give wheelchair users greater independence

Kitchens often require considerable work to ensure they are safe and to retain a disabled person's independence. The good news is there are many ingenious solutions that can help people to stay in their own home. But there are a huge number of different ways to adapt a kitchen, so the choices can be bewildering.

First look at reducing the 'danger zone' areas, such as cookers and gas appliances. Then consider height adaptation to some of the kitchen areas so that a wheelchair user or a visually impaired or deaf person can prepare snacks and food for him or herself.

Some of the adaptations that are required either prevent accidents happening or buy valuable time if something does go wrong, in the event of a fire, for instance.

These adaptations include:

- Keeping the area well lit.
- Unplugging all appliances after use.
- Fitting a smoke and carbon monoxide alarm - and test them weekly (buy special vibrating pads or flashing lights for people who can't hear).
- Removing any obstacles, such as low coffee tables or rugs.

- Having a fire extinguisher and blanket to hand.
- Keeping any knives or kitchen utensils safely out of the way.
- Installing covers for areas like the cooker hob, such as a cooker guard
- Positioning a washing machine and dishwasher for easy reach; a top-loading washing machine or tabletop dishwasher might be useful.

Cookers

Choose a cooker that can be left on at little risk and is easy to clean. For example, a halogen hob that isn't hot when touched, rather than a gas hob or oven. Microwaves are handy but can be dangerous for people with dementia who may not remember they shouldn't put any metal inside.

Built-in ovens at just the right height, with a drop down door that can be used as an extra shelf if required, are an excellent way of helping people to be independent, while not impacting on anyone else in the home.

Work surfaces for wheelchair users

Adaptations can be made to the height of units and appliances to limit the amount of bending down required, or to allow wheelchair usage. A guideline for wheelchair users is to place a worktop at 10cm below the elbow.

However, there are many different types of wheelchairs, so it is best to get the individual and the kitchen measured by an expert to work out the best dimensions for height and depth. There are also adjustable height shelves and tabletop cookers available.

Disability aids

There are lots of handy devices and tips that can make a real difference to disabled people in everyday life.

Corner carousels can be really useful to help you find things easily without too much bending and twisting.

Pull-out worktops and foldaway ironing boards can make it simpler to use the kitchen.

Mobile trolleys provide easy-to-access storage.

Easy-to-use handles - small or slippery knobs can cause difficulties.

Choose matt surfaces to avoid reflective glare for the partially sighted and think carefully about the type of taps you want, and their position. They don't have to be at the back of the sink. Levers rather than screw taps can be easier to use. There are also taps available for those that have a weak grip or that can be turned on and off at floor level. Or adaptations that can be fitted to your existing taps to make them easier to use

Bathrooms -



Consider grab rails, non-slip flooring and an extractor fan

It's very important to adapt the bathroom so that whatever disability a person has, they can use the room as independently as possible. These changes are helpful for many conditions:

- a hand-held shower facility,
- grab rails for the shower or bath,
- non-slip flooring, and

- an extractor fan to keep the bathroom clear of steam.

Adapting baths and showers

If space allows, you might also want to consider including a hoist to allow someone with poor mobility to be gently lowered into the bath. Alternatively, there are baths available with doors for easy access and showers can be specially built to cope with wheelchairs.

Some shower cubicles can even be created to cater for both showering and going to the toilet, if they are fitted with a special macerator that gets rid of the waste. This can be particularly helpful in areas where space is tight.

Hot water

You must ensure that there is an even water temperature to prevent scalding accidents. It is possible to fix the temperature to a certain range so that no one can be hurt. And consider installing a thermostatic or electric shower.

Adapting toilets

It is usually easy to buy adaptations to raise the toilet seat to a required level. This might be just a second seat to go on top, or a frame that can be put over the toilet to ensure it is the right height for the disabled person. Raised toilet seats and raised seats with frames are usually available free of charge through social services following an occupational therapist assessment.

Choosing a supplier

There are many companies that specialise in adapting and fitting bathrooms.

But before you contact a company, try to get a visit and assessment from your local authority or HSE occupational therapist service. They may be free of charge and any advice will be unbiased as they don't benefit from any sales that a company makes. It's a good way to make sure you spend your money on what you or your relative need, rather than what someone wants to sell you.

Many suppliers have showrooms you can visit to see all the different types of bathrooms that can be created. Large companies have people that can come around and assess the best place for a new bathroom, or the type of fittings that you need.

Information provided by Which magazine.