

Tips to Live Independently at Home as You Age: Entrance Stairs, Ramps, Doors and Lighting

by Art Nash

We will all lose some of our abilities as we age, but many of us have a hard time imagining what it will mean as far as getting around our homes. The place where we have built our lives, raised our families and feel most comfortable may become unsuitable over time if arthritis, unexpected fractures or poor eyesight become barriers to getting around. In Alaska, finding suitable housing that can accommodate walkers or wheelchairs can be challenging, especially in rural areas. With the average Alaskan living just beyond 78 years, looking to universal design for “aging in place” may be the best solution.

Think of the potential fiscal advantages of staying in your home as long as possible. According to the national Genworth 2016 Cost of Care Survey, the average stay in an assisted living home in Alaska runs just over \$5,700/month, and some nursing homes cost almost \$25,000/month for a private room. Although these figures may vary significantly, they exceed by far an average monthly mortgage payment.

With universal design modifications, people of all ages and abilities are able to function independently at home. Modifications may be as simple as adding bathroom grab bars, replacing round doorknobs with lever handles or changing lighting orientation. Or major changes may be required, such as widening doorways, installing walk-in or roll-in showers, replacing countertops, lowering cupboards or installing sliding pocket doors along interior walls. Although there are many kinds of modifications you can make to stay in your home as you age, this publication offers an overview of what areas to think about modifying to get in and out of your dwelling.

Steps

Steps and stairs are the second most common cause of injury for people over the age of 65. The consequences of just one fall can diminish an older person’s quality of life forever by creating permanent injuries that reduce health, mobility, independence and confidence. Many homes in Alaska are built on stilts (pad and post) because of permafrost and conditions in coastal environments. These homes often have wooden steps/stairs that climb up to 5 feet above the ground to the front door. Or homes may be built on a daylight basement and have concrete stairs.



Photo courtesy of Access Alaska

Half a dozen tips for stairs and steps

- Straight steps are best for homes where mobility equipment and chair lifts might be necessary in the future.
- Stair widths of 3 to 4 feet and handrails on both sides allow for stability.
- If a stairway requires turns, 90-degree turns and generously sized landings allow room for extended elbows when carrying items.
- Painting alternating colors on 12-inch-deep horizontal treads and 6-inch-tall vertical risers can help with visibility and stability.
- Treads are best when constructed level with well-maintained, slip-resistant surfaces.
- The “nose” on the front edge of the step, or tread, should be even with the riser to prevent tripping. Colored duct tape on the nose can help with visibility.

Finally, be sure to secure pickets evenly and solidly on the sides of the stairs, preferably 4 to 5 inches apart.

Ramps and Doors

If you are thinking of building a ramp rather than stairs to the entrance, keep in mind that plans that are adequate in the Lower 48 may not work well when constructed in Alaska. For instance, in Southeast ramps can be covered with rain, slick vegetation or ice most of the year and may require a type of mesh or grating on the horizontal surface to improve traction and allow water to pass through. In



the Interior and on the northwest coast, ice and snow can cover ramps more than half of the year, and snow falling off the roof onto the ramp is also a big issue. Thus, when building ramps, an installer needs to take local conditions — as well as the current building construction — into account.



Photo courtesy of Cold Climate Housing Research Center

Doors should be wide enough for wheelchairs with no tripping hazards. Door handles should be easy to grasp and use for people who have arthritis or other disabilities.

Half a dozen tips on ramps and doors

- A good rule of thumb is to make the ramp a foot long for every inch of rise.
- The transition threshold under the door jam should be recessed into the floor so that it is flush with the ramp outside.
- A bottom sweep on the inside of the exterior door can keep snow and wind out.
- A 3-foot-wide doorway is wide enough for someone using a walker, wheelchair or scooter to pass through.
- A flat, horizontal handle, rather than a round knob, is best for arthritic hands and allows for use of elbows when hands are full.
- Side windows or lowered peep holes (vertically next to the door) enable someone seated in a wheel chair to see out.

Lighting

Aging eyes often require more light as pupils get smaller, and they react slowly to changing light conditions like glare, shadows and fluctuating light levels. Thickening lenses reduce depth perception and make it harder to focus, absorb light and distinguish colors.

Half a dozen tips on lighting

- Sensors along the walkway can turn lights on automatically as people approach the house (or enter a dark room).

- Flexible fixtures that can be adjusted to illuminate directly will help during the various seasons.
- Inset lighting above the entrance in an overhang, rather than a floodlight pointing outward, provides light when unlocking the door and operating the handle.
- LEDs last longer than other bulbs so they don't have to be replaced as often, which means there is less chance of falling off a ladder while changing bulbs.
- To avoid difficulty with handling switches, install touch light switches.
- Timers save electricity and ensure that lights go on when it gets dark.

These are general tips to assist you with safety and ease in getting in and out of your home. View the short film "Aging in Place in Alaska" (www.youtube.com/watch?v=l8wXqWTqO2k) for specific measurements and details. These tips may make a big difference in convenience and safety in what is most likely your largest investment — your home.

Home modifications can offer payback in several ways. They can help you live independently longer, and with few accessible homes in Alaska's current housing stock, you may see these adaptations increase the market value of your home.

If you do move out of your home at some point and want to rent it, such modifications can help you attract older tenants. Educate yourself on what universal design has to offer and what retail materials are available, whether you're building a new home, remodeling or just making a few modifications.

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