Adapting your home: The bathroom

Disclaimer

This factsheet is for advice and guidance only. It is not intended to replace advice from a medical professional. Please ensure you follow manufacturer's instructions for use and that you carry out appropriate risk assessments.

Introduction

If you are finding it difficult moving around and/or using your bathroom, you may need to consider:

- Changing your home environment.
- Adapting or building a bathroom that will meet your needs.
- Using or installing equipment that will help you (and a carer if you require one).

There are a number of health conditions that can impact on your ability to access or use your bathroom. For example, if you have a problem that affects your hip joints, you may not be able to lift your legs over the side of the bath. Or if you have problems with your upper body, you may find it difficult to wipe yourself after using the toilet. The average person uses the toilet to urinate 6-7 times a day, so access to a bathroom and toilet is an important part of daily life.

Typical aspects of the bathroom that can make it difficult or unsafe to access and use can include one or more of the following:

- Getting in and out of the bath can become difficult or impossible, especially when you are wet and the surfaces are slippery. There is a higher risk of injury if you fall in the bathroom.
- You may not be able to lift your legs over the bath to use simple bathing equipment.
- You may not be able to see and/or operate traditional taps if you have weak grip or poor sight.
- You could experience difficulty in getting up from a low toilet if you have stiff knees or a painful back.
- You may have difficulty in getting to the toilet in time if you have problems with continence.
- You may have difficulty in getting into your bathroom if you are using a wheelchair or a walking frame.
- There could be a lack of sufficient space or a suitable layout that could enable a carer to provide support.
- The location of the toilet can make it difficult to get to, such as if the toilet is upstairs, you may hold off for as long as possible or struggle to get to the bathroom due to poor mobility.

An assessment by an Occupational Therapist

If you are unsure about the best way to maintain your safety and independence whilst bathing, or you have complex needs, you are advised to obtain an assessment by an occupational therapist who can discuss your needs and requirements. You can either access the NHS community occupational therapy team (which can be arranged via your GP or local authority) or arrange to be assessed by a private occupational therapist. More information about how to arrange a visit by an occupational therapist (including if you wish to arrange a visit by an independent OT and pay privately) can be found via the Royal College of Occupational Therapists (RCOT). You should also check that the occupational therapist is registered to practice with the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC).

If you are planning a new purpose-built accessible bathroom, be check if you require planning permission and/or building regulations approval . There are also building regulations in England for new buildings or those that have a material change of use to ensure that people are not discriminated against due to a disability, and that they are able to access and use buildings. This includes specific guidance as to minimum door widths and that whether there is sufficient space around basins and toilets in bathrooms.

Installing a new bathroom can potentially be an intrusive and stressful experience, but if well planned out could provide you with a long-lasting solution.

Small equipment or aid options

Before you consider a major adaptation, such as installing a level access shower, you may find that smaller pieces of equipment will enable you to continue using a bath. Examples include:

- Assisted baths/baths with integral lifts.
- Fixing support rails.
- Perching stools, shower seats, stalls and benches.
- Bath and shower boards.
- Bath stools.
- Swivel bath seats.
- Bath lifts.
- Non-slip bath mats.
- Lever taps.
- Lighting.
- Installing a shower over the bath.

How will you access your bathroom?

You need to consider your current and future level of mobility when designing a bathroom adaptation:

- If the bathroom is located upstairs, will you be able to continue to access this in the long-term? Can your home be adapted in the future - for example with additional stair rails, a stairlift or through floor lift?
- Do you currently use a walking aid? Will this change in the future?
- How much space will you require to use you walking aid, and move around with it, inside the bathroom? (E.g. a walking stick will need less space than a walking frame.)
- Is your bathroom door sufficiently wide enough to allow you access with your walking aid?
- Will you require the help of a carer to wash or dry yourself?

A toilet located on the ground floor can be advantageous, as this can limit the number of stair climbs you have to undertake in a day. If your bedroom is located upstairs and the bathroom and toilet are downstairs, you will need to consider how you will get up and down the stairs at night if you should need to use the bathroom. To avoid trips and falls when getting up to use the toilet at night it is a good idea to invest in some adequate lighting, wear appropriate footwear and perhaps consider using a commode if you are unsteady on your feet.

If you are a wheelchair user, or may be in the future, access to the bathroom should be step-free and the width of the door into the bathroom is an important factor to accessing the bathroom. For wheelchair access, building regulations state that the width of the doorway should provide clear access of at least 850mm and the bathroom have a clear turning circle of 1500mm. When adapting the bathroom for a wheelchair user, it is important to consider the location of the bath and basin on a pedestal, as they can reduce the amount of space in which to turn. Also remember that a child's wheelchair will get larger as they grow, so allowance for an 'adult-size' wheelchair should be factored in when planning a bathroom adaptation. Although some wheelchair users can move from the chair into a bath, its presence in a bathroom can reduce the amount of space. To maximise the turning circle it would be worth considering a 'wet room' shower.

If your toilet is in a room adjacent to the bathroom, it may be an advantage to remove the wall when redesigning the bathroom - this further increases the amount of space in the bathroom and allows for a more favourable layout.

How will you heat your bathroom?

It is important to ensure that adequate heating is supplied to the bathroom, as wet skin can reduce body temperature very quickly. Heat can also potentially be lost through outside walls and windows. If you are fitting additional radiators, your builder or plumber will need to ensure that your boiler has the capacity to heat them. Thermostats fitted to individual radiators allow for room temperatures to be adjusted during use.

N.B - the type of heating used, and its location, may need review for some children

Especially if space is limited and carer support is needed during bathing and toileting, as this may increase risk of prolonged contact with a heat source.

Alternative sources of heat for your bathroom include:

- **Under floor heating**

This is usually controlled by wall mounted panels. This has the advantage of reducing the space taken up by conventional radiators and will heat the entire room evenly. It can also be used to assist in keeping the floor dry, thereby reducing the risk of falls.

- **Electric heated towel rails**

These are not connected to the hot water system and so they can be used independently to provide additional heat when the central heating system is not in use. They can also be used to dry out and warm towels. The rails can be placed on the wall rather than be floor mounted. N.B. care should be taken when fitting - these should not be positioned in a way that they could enable them to be used a grab rail. They are not designed to offer support, and they have the potential to cause burns if gripped.

- **Mains heated towel rails**

These are connected to the central heating system in the same way a radiator is.

- **A surface temperature radiator**

This does not usually exceed 43 degrees Celsius and therefore reduces the risk of scalding. They are particularly useful for households with children or people with dementia or other cognitive issues.

- **A wall mounted fan heater**

This can provide a small amount of heat in the summer months when the full central heating system is not is use.

How will you stay safe in the bathroom?

A high number of people experience falls in the bathroom, so it is important to ensure that should you get into difficulty that you have a way of summoning help. Portable alarms or falls detectors are usually worn around the neck or on the wrist but these are very often not waterproof so are taken off whilst washing. For this reason, it's advisable to consider either placing the pendant nearby when bathing or having an alternative method of raising an alarm, such as a voice activated devices.

If you have sensory problems which affect your ability to detect the temperature of the water in the bath, or need to ensure the water temperature is correct for babies and young children, guidance on how to use equipment to help prevent scalding can be found on the Living Made Easy website.

The choice of accessories in the bathroom is important for people with **dementia or sight loss.** The RNIB recommend that wall tiles should be matt and a different colour to the floor and advise that grab rails and washbasins are a contrasting colour to the wall. They also recommend that contrasting colours are used for the toilet seat. You should also consider fitting anti-slip flooring which is matt in colour to reduce glare.

The Alzheimer's Society (a charity providing support for those affected by dementia) suggest that switches and controls are familiar and easy to use, a flood prevention plug is fitted to the bath and basin and in addition door locks should be able to be easily opened in the case of an emergency.

Appropriate lighting within a bathroom could help to keep you safe and the lighting level required will differ from person to person. The Thomas Pocklington Trust (a charity and advocate of equality for blind and partially sighted people) have produced a Lighting Guide, endorsed by the Institution of Lighting Professionals, to help visually impaired people improve lighting at home to enable their independent.

Disruption to your home

If you only have one bathroom in your property, you need to consider how you will access toileting and bathing facilities whilst the work is being carried out. Any major adaptation will create a level of noise, dust and disruption and it is therefore necessary to plan ahead before any of the work undertaken.

Baths

There may be several reasons why you may wish to have a bath inside a bathroom adaptation:

- You may prefer to have a bath rather than a shower.
- You may have complex needs which mean that using a shower with equipment is not possible – even with level access.
- You may be sharing the bathroom with other people who would prefer to keep a bath.
- The bathroom may be used by multiple people who have different needs.

Some people prefer to keep a bath as they find the warm water helps with pain relief. To help maintain safe access to a bath it is helpful to consider the following:

- Do you have a condition which makes bathing unsafe, for example epilepsy?
- Where is the bath located in your property and how you will access it?
- Can you maintain your balance when getting into the bath?
- How is the strength in your upper body? For example, are you able to take some weight though your arms to push up into a standing position, and do you have adequate grip strength to be able to turn taps on and off?
- Do you have a condition that is likely to worsen over time affecting your ability to access the bath or bathroom in the future (even with the use of equipment)?
- Do you need to use emollients or bathe in certain liquids? This can cause slipping or difficulties with the fitting and use of some aids.

If you are concerned about any of these issues, you may wish to consider installing a shower tray (see section on showers below).

If you are re-designing a bathroom, or perhaps adding an en-suite to a property, it is important to consider the layout of the bathroom to ensure you can easily access the bath. A bath placed next to a solid wall for example would mean any grab rails fixed to the walls would be more secure. Also, be aware of sloped or low ceilings, especially if a bathroom is on the first floor, as this can restrict head room and make getting in and out of a bath difficult. If you are considering a shower screen on the bath, you need to be aware that this could prevent some equipment being fitted to the top of the bath. Also be mindful that a wash hand basin placed next to a bath could restrict the shower screen from opening, meaning you would have less room to exit the bath.

If you struggle to access the bath because of poor balance or have difficulty with stepping over the bath side, you may wish to consider using equipment that can assist you with this, such as bath lifts and hoists.

Standard baths

If you are replacing a bath, or fitting one to use with bathing aids, and anticipate the need to fit or replace any equipment as your needs change, then a standard bath offers more flexibility in the future. Unusually shaped baths, for example a corner, sunken, or ‘P’ shaped bath, can be difficult to access and fit aids or equipment. It is advisable to check that there are no ripples or ridges at the bottom of the bath (designed to aid with gripping with your feet) as this can prevent some equipment with suckers being fitted safely. In addition, the rim of the bath should be parallel and at least 37mm or 1.5 inches wide so equipment such as bath boards can be fitted safely.

The type of taps used, and where they will be fitted to the bath, should be considered. Depending on your needs, it may be easier to have the taps placed in the middle, on the far side of the bath, so they can be accessed more easily, however this position may restrict some bath equipment. If you have a weak grip and find taps difficult to turn, you may wish to choose to have lever taps fitted, which can be lifted or turned more easily.

N.B taps should never be used as aids to get in and out of the bath - you should use a properly positioned and fitted grab rail instead.

Specialist baths

If you have more complex needs, or would prefer to keep using a bath but not necessarily with the addition of separate bathing aids, then a specialist bath could offer a solution.

Specialist baths are typically designed to either allow the user to step or walk-in to the bath or access by using an integrated seat. Some models have fold down sides to form a changing surface, or an integrated changing stretcher.

Many people feel that a walk-in bath will meet their needs. However, before choosing a specialist bath, it is worth considering the following:

- You will need to step up and down to access and exit the bath, some may find this difficult.
- Integral seats are either static or swivel types, generally made from moulded plastic. Some may not adjust to individual needs.
- Some baths have small door cutaways, which can be helpful if there's a difficulty in lifting the legs over the side of the bath.
- If you have difficulty maintaining your body temperature, bear in mind you will need to sit in the bath while it fills and empties.
- A bath with high sides can make it difficult for a carer to give assistance to someone who may need help with washing. An adjustable-height bath might help.
- Height-adjustable options may be suitable for those who are able to get into a bath from a standing position or for where there are multiple people using the bath with a varying level of mobility.
- Height-adjustable baths are often used in combination with a ceiling track hoists or other pieces of equipment to assist a carer.

A specialist bath can be a costly adaptation, and it is recommended that you obtain an assessment by an occupational therapist who can discuss your needs and requirements. You can either access the NHS community occupational therapy team (which can be arranged via your GP or local authority) or arrange to be assessed by a private occupational therapist. Further information about how to do this can be found above in the introduction under ‘Assessment by an Occupational Therapist’.

Showers

If you have a condition that affects your ability to access the bath, you may wish to consider installing a shower.

- An electric shower or mixer shower can be fitted over a bath.
- Shower trays can be step in or offer low/ramped access. They can be fitted to a concrete or wooden floor and are usually straightforward to install.
- Wet room trays offer close to level access and allow for maximum space in the bathroom.

Showers over the bath

If you are able to access the bath and want to keep disruption to your bathroom at a minimum, you may wish to install an over-bath shower. Typically, these can be fairly easy to install, but it is worth considering if this is a viable long-term option. Showers fitted over the bath are generally either electric units or mixer taps.

An electric shower unit works off the mains pressure cold water. Water passes over an element in the shower unit that heats the water.

Mixer showers are used with a combi-boiler or pressurised hot water system. The flow and temperature are usually controlled separately through the taps; lever taps are available if help with grip is required.

Either type of shower can be fitted over a bath, in a shower cubicle or as part of a level access shower.

When deciding on where to position a shower unit, it is important to consider who will be using it, and how it will be used. If you sit down to shower for example, you may wish to have the controls set at an accessible height. If the bath is rectangular in shape, the shower is traditionally located above the taps (this is mostly due to the location of the hot and cold water feeds). Placing the shower unit on the long wall may make it more accessible to the user or carer, but it can involve a more complex installation. If you require assistance with showering, the hose attached to the shower head should be long enough to be taken off the slider bar and used by a carer.

When choosing a unit, ensure that you are able to switch it on and off and adjust the heat settings as necessary. Larger buttons and/or a grip dial may aid ease of use if a person's hand and wrist function is reduced. Some electric shower units have been approved by the RNIB as they have features that can make them easier to operate. For example, an audible ‘click’ will sound when the dial is turned, or contrasting colours, or matt or glossy finishes to the shower units can help visually impaired users to see the controls.

Check for the BEAB Approved Mark. This electrical safety mark that demonstrates that independent specialists have evaluated the electrical safety of a product to the highest European and International standards.

If you decide to fit a shower over the bath, consider the type of equipment you need now, or may need in the future, that enables you to get into the bath and access the shower safely. Do you need assistance from a carer to get into the bath and how long you will be able to undertake this task? If you are concerned about your ability to access an over bath shower over time, a shower tray may be a more appropriate solution. Advice from an occupational therapist would be beneficial in this regard as they would be able to assess your needs and advise further.

Shower trays

You may decide to remove the bath altogether and replace it with a shower tray. Or your bathroom may be large enough to accommodate a shower tray and a bath. Depending on your needs and preferences, there are a number of shower trays you can choose from.

Factors to consider when choosing a shower tray:

- The size of the shower tray may depend on the space in the bathroom. The minimum size is usually 900mm by 900mm, larger trays can be 1500mm by 1200mm or longer. It is important to consider what equipment will be required in a shower area. For example, a person using a self-propelled shower chair will take up much more space than an ambulant (walking) person using a drop-down shower stool.
- A ‘step-in’ shower tray (also known as ‘shower cubicle’) is usually square in shape, though larger rectangular sizes are available. Some step-in shower trays are low level, which means the height of the tray is as low as 32mm (approx. 1.25 inches). Other shower trays can have a step of 150mm (6 inches) or more, which may make access to the shower cubicle more difficult for those with mobility problems.
- The type of shower tray and the amount of work involved will be dictated by the plumbing and drainage of the property. Many pre-formed shower trays are only suitable for gravity waste drains. In some circumstances a pump may be required to draw the water away down the plug holes if gravity waste cannot be achieved. Once installed the pump may take up more room and create more noise when wastewater is being pumped away. You would need to speak with your installer about the type of shower tray that can be fitted in your bathroom.
- If you are replacing the bath with a shower tray, it may be possible to choose a size that fits in the space where the existing bath is. This has the advantage of being able to use the drainage and plumbing that is already installed for the bath (the installer will need to assess what the requirements are for your particular house).
- If the shower tray is hidden, it should always be covered with a safety-type flooring to reduce the risk of slipping. It is beneficial to cover the whole of the bathroom floor in this type of flooring and not just the shower area.

Shower screens

When planning a bathroom adaptation, it is important to take into consideration the need for and location of a shower screen. A shower screen is designed to keep the water within the area of the shower tray and to prevent water splashes from hitting the floor.

Fixed screens

Fixed screens can be half or full height.

A half-height screen allows a carer to reach over to help with washing. These types of screens can also be fitted with a shower pole and curtain and used for times when assistance isn't required.

Full-height fixed screens come in a range of configurations. For example they can be installed in wet rooms or level access showers or step-in shower trays. Some full-height screens include a door, which helps to seal the shower area. The majority of full-height screens are made of toughened glass.

Doors can also be bi- or tri-fold. The decision for one or the other will be based upon size and tray compatibility.

When deciding which door or screen to fit, consider the following:

- Ensure the opening is wide enough for someone to walk through safely.
- If using a fixed door, ensure there is enough space to get in and out of the shower when it is opened.
- An outward opening door will not restrict movement inside the tray like an inward opening door. However, it may drip water onto the floor when opened.
- Ensure the door handle is easily identifiable and easy to grip.

Some people have conditions that cause spasms and it is essential to consider the needs of the user and their safety when choosing glass panels or glass screens.

If spasms are unpredictable, it would be worth considering using portable screens that can be placed appropriately within the shower area.

Portable shower screens

These can be purchased separately to the shower tray.

They can suit people who require assistance from a carer when using the shower and can be placed where they are needed, preventing the carer from getting wet.

The majority of half-height screens are made of polycarbonate, which is designed to be tough and light. They can usually be folded down for transportation/storage. Depending on the needs of the carer and/or if space is restricted, a portable shower screen may be a more appropriate choice than a fixed screen.

Shower curtains and rails

You may opt to have a shower curtain fitted in addition to half height carer screens, or you may prefer to have a shower curtain instead of full height screens. Whichever the case, you will need to have a rail that the shower curtain will fit to.

The track or rail for the curtain can be purchased in a range of different lengths and shapes:

- L-shaped track – for where the shower enclosure is in a corner of a bathroom.
- U-shaped track – for where a shower curtain is required on three sides of the shower area.
- Flexible track – a track which can be trimmed to size and bent to the required shape.
- T-shaped window spanning track – for where a window encroaches onto a shower area.
- Swing-away tracks - can be used with a ceiling track hoist which covers the shower area.

Shower curtains can be readily found on the high street or online, however there are different types and widths, so it is important to consider the size of the shower area and length of track required before ordering a curtain.

- The width of a shower curtain can range from 900mm to 2500mm (35.5 inches to 98.5 inches).
- A weighted shower curtain is designed to lie more easily on the floor and prevent water escaping underneath. To create an effective barrier, it should finish 5mm above the floor level but not drag on the floor. It will also prevent any movement of the curtain which can occur when a shower is running.
- ‘Standard’ and ‘heavy duty’ shower curtains are made of woven polyester. The heavy duty’ version is a thicker curtain.

Shower benches and changing tables

If you require a very high level of support and are not able to use a shower chair, you may benefit from a shower bench or shower trolley.

Shower trolleys enable a person to be wheeled in and out of the shower area. These are often used in care homes or other residential settings where there is sufficient space to push a shower trolley through doorways and hallways. If there isn't the space within the home to use a trolley, a wall mounted, or foldable shower bench could be fitted within the shower area.

Shower benches can be used to wash, dry and dress the user. The user can also be assisted off the bench by an appropriate method (e.g. hoisting) if required.

Depending on the model, shower stretchers and benches can be wall-mounted, height-adjustable and/or folded away after use. Shower stretchers and benches can also be installed in a ‘dry’ area and just used for changing or personal care.

Before installing a shower bench, careful consideration needs to be given to the layout of the shower area, the strength of the wall (if wall-mounted), the type and size of the shower bench required and how the user will access this (e.g. by a ceiling track hoist). There is a huge range available, and they can be a costly item. Therefore, it is recommended that you seek advice from an occupational therapist before purchasing one for your bathroom adaptation.

Wash basins

There are several factors to consider when choosing a wash basin for your bathroom adaptation, some of these considerations are:

- Who will be using the wash basin? How will they be using it (e.g. washing hands, shaving, or a strip wash etc)?
- Will they be standing, seated or both (e.g. does the user stand, but use a perching stool or wheelchair when fatigued)?
- Is wheelchair access required? If so, can the user access the basin and is there knee space underneath?
- Consider the size of the space that is required. If the adaptation is a small en-suite toilet for example a cloakroom basin (typically a smaller sized bowl) may be more applicable.
- Where will toiletries be located and are they accessible to the user/s?
- How is the plug operated? If the user is accessing the wash basin independently, can they fit a plug and remove it again?
- Will any equipment need to be fitted at the time of the adaptation or in the future? To allow for this, ideally the wash basin should not be located too close to the toilet.

Types of wash basin

Pedestal

A standard pedestal wash basin does not usually have any features specifically designed for disabled or older people, unless it is fitted with lever taps. You may wish to consider installing this type if the user has cognitive difficulties and has used a basin of this type of basin in the past (changing to a different type of basin could cause confusion.)

Countertop basin

This type of basin is situated on top of a surface e.g. a worktop or vanity unit. Again, it does not have any features specifically for older or disabled people and it can be difficult for wheelchair or seated users to lean over to turn the taps on and off.

Wall-mounted wash basins

A fully wall-mounted basin has minimal plumbing below the level of the basin. This is especially helpful if the user is washing from a seated position, as the knees can fit underneath the basin. The position of the tap or taps on a basin should be considered - could they be more accessible if they were positioned to the side of the basin for example? This is especially important for wheelchair users.

Half-pedestal wall-mounted wash basins can be fitted with flexible plumbing to allow the basin to be raised or lowered, if necessary, in the future. However, this style can restrict access for wheelchair users.

Plugs

The use of a plug is not always necessary with a wash basin - many people may only use running water to wash their hands and face or brush their teeth. However, if a plug is necessary, consideration should be given to the user's dexterity and ability to place and remove a plug from the plug hole.

Plugs with a large handle attached to them or a 'pop up' or a 'flip top' waste may be easier to operate. Alternatively, a plug that automatically empties if the capacity of the wash basin is reached can be useful for people who may forget to turn the taps off (e.g. cognitive impairments).

Body dryers

Body dryers are usually vertical units, fitted near to a shower or bath and use hot air or infra-red heat to dry the body. They can have the advantage of heating the bathroom as well as drying the user.

If a user becomes fatigued when using a towel, or wishes to have privacy when drying, then a body dryer may be appropriate. Body dryers can also be beneficial for particular medical conditions, e.g. if skin is sensitive or damaged.

You may like to consider the following:

- Some dryers have to be positioned in the corner of a room and this will affect the location of other items within the bathroom adaptation.
- Body dryers may not be suitable for someone who is sensitive to sound. Although the sounds vary, 70 decibels on some models is the equivalent noise to a vacuum cleaner in use.
- Check the location of any switches and the dexterity required of the user. Some body dryers use infra-red controls and are switched on by movement.
- A UV panel dryer can be considerably more expensive than an air body dryer.
- Consideration must be given to the seated user; it will not be possible to dry all areas of the body from a seated position.
- Some dryers can be located over a changing table/shower stretcher to dry the user whilst in a lying position. N.B - this will only dry the side of the body facing the dryer.
- Always check the manufacturer’s warranty and factor in a budget for any on-going service costs.

Toilets

Toileting is an essential part of our daily activities, and it is important to ensure the toilet in your bathroom meets your needs. When planning a bathroom adaption in the home, the location and features of a toilet are an essential part of this.

You will need to consider the following:

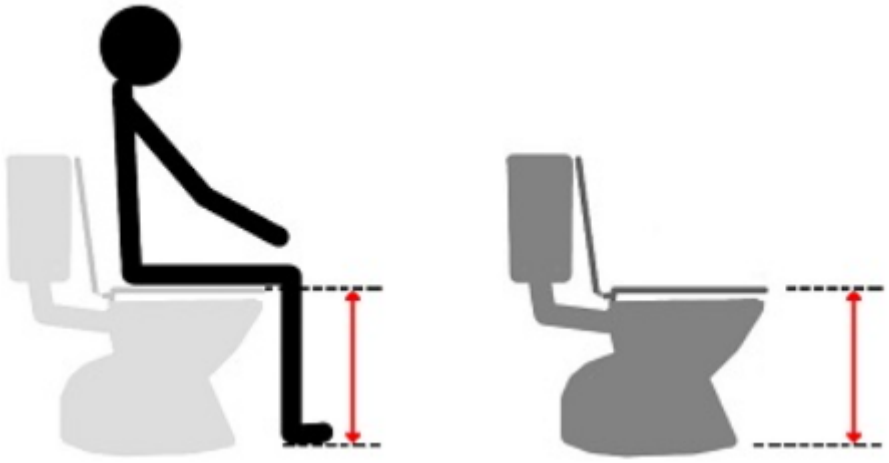
- Is the toilet in the bathroom or in an adjacent room? Where within the room is the toilet positioned? Some people may have the need to use the toilet at short notice and the most efficient way of reaching the toilet should always be planned for. It is also important to ensure that the toilet is accessible and usable by all members of the household.
- If a walking aid is used (for example a walking frame) where will this be positioned while the toilet is being used? If the person is a wheelchair user, they may need to face the toilet and pivot to move onto the toilet seat or position the wheelchair to one side of the toilet and use a transfer board. Space to allow for this should be included when planning the bathroom. Also, good practice guidance recommends that the door to the bathroom (regardless of whether it opens inwards or outwards) should not encroach upon the turning space of the wheelchair or minimum activity space. If a ceiling track hoist is used to help a person onto a toilet, consideration should be given to the space where they will be transferred from.
- Does the user need to use grab rails? If so, where will they be placed? And are the walls solid and able to have rails fitted to them?
- If a carer is required to assist with toileting, consideration should be given to where the carer will stand, and sufficient room should be allowed for the carer to provide the necessary support.

The height of the toilet

Getting the right height toilet is crucial in providing safe use, comfort and independence within the bathroom. It is particularly important if a transfer board is used. If other people will be using the toilet, the height will need to be suitable for them too.

If your thighs are horizontal (with your knees and hips at the same height) when sat on the toilet and your feet flat on the floor, then the toilet is probably a good height for you. The diagrams show a toilet that is likely to be too low (the person's knees are higher than their hips) and too high (the person's hips are higher than their knees and their feet are off the floor).





If you wish to check this, then the toilet height most likely to suit an individual is approximately the same as the distance between the floor and the bottom of their thigh behind their knee, as shown in the diagram. The toilet height should be measured from the floor to the top of the seat. The height to the person's thigh should be measured when they are wearing their usual shoes or slippers. When being measured, they should be sat on a chair at a height at which their thighs are horizontal with their knees and hips at the same height, their knee and ankle joints should be roughly at a right angle, as shown in the diagram. When rounding the measurement to the nearest centimetre, round down rather than up.

Equipment to raise the height of an existing toilet

Most models of raised toilet seats clamp onto the rim of the toilet bowl and the original seat remains in place, stuck in the 'up' position. Some models replace the original seat. When using a raised toilet seat, it is important to check that it is fastened securely and does not move. If you are raising the only toilet in the house, then consider other users, including children, who may struggle to use the raised toilet safely. Other users of your toilet may need to, or prefer to, remove a raised toilet seat when using the toilet. Consider whether they will be able to remove it and replace it ready for your use. If they remove it, they must know how to refit it correctly.

Raised toilet seats with frames and toilet seats with armrests provide handholds that you may wish to use if you feel unsteady or unsupported when sat on a toilet. These should not be considered if you have a one-sided weakness unless it can be fixed to the floor. Always check that the weight capacity of any toilet equipment you use exceeds your weight.

Flush controls

There are a range of handles that can be fitted to the toilet to help those with problems with dexterity or grip to flush the toilet. The location of the flush is also important; it needs to be accessible for the user in order to promote independence. Cisterns that will be used by wheelchair users should have their flushing mechanism positioned on the open or transfer side of the space.

Flush controls such as levers, which are wider and flat, can make them easier to push with the palm of your hand or elbow. Alternatively, no-touch infra-red flush controls can be activated with the wave of a hand. These can sometimes be located to the side of the toilet or on the floor to meet the needs of the user.

Wash/dry toilets and seats

Difficulties with upper limb movement, balance, dexterity, cognitive function and a user’s weight can all affect the ability to manually clean themselves after using the toilet. Wash/dry toilets and seats provide automatic flushing, warm water washing and warm air drying after using the toilet. It is usually operated with a hand control which can be held by the user or carer or mounted onto a wall. Some suppliers provide touch sensitive switches which can be operated with a fist, elbow or under the armpit if dexterity is an issue. It is important to note that a wash/dry toilet can be used as a standard flushing toilet without using the wash/dry feature.

The provision of a wash/dry toilet can remove the need for a carer's assistance, helping to promote independence and dignity in toileting for the user.

Points to consider:

- A wash/dry toilet requires a mains electrical connection to work. This, along with any space requirements, will need to be considered when designing the bathroom.
- You may need to source your own plumber to fit or service the unit. Some companies offer an extended warranty and have a dedicated team of engineers on-hand to fit their products.
- WRAS (Water Regulations Approval Scheme) approval is important, as it shows regulations relating to installation and performance have been complied with.
- The wash/dry toilet can be operated without the washing and drying functions if it is to be used by other members of the household.
- Consider any additional adaptations that may be required, either now or in the future. For example, integral arms, a plinth to raise the toilet, lateral supports - and its compatibility with other equipment. Not all wash/dry toilets can be adapted.
- Toilets, as with other devices, have a safe working load – check with the supplier before ordering.
- Consider any cognitive impairment and the ease of use of the product – especially if it is to be operated independently. Complex hand controls can be confusing for some people.
- Wall-mounted models enable them to be positioned at a height to suit the user and offer more clearance under the bowl. These features may be particularly advantageous if you are using the device from a wheelchair, mobile toilet chair or commode.
- As there are many features of a wash dry toilet, a demonstration prior to purchase is recommended to ensure the product is right for you. Contact the manufacturer for more information.
- Wash dry toilets are sometimes available via your local authority under a Disabled Facilities Grant. An assessment by an occupational therapist would be required to proceed with this.

Commode

If you find it difficult to get to the toilet, have an urgent need to use the toilet, or need access to the toilet in the night when it might be more difficult or unsafe to get to the bathroom (especially if the bathroom is up or down some stairs), a commode might be a good option. You will need to be able to sit down and stand up unaided, have good sitting balance and be able to transfer from bed to commode and back again. You will also need to have adequate space to place the commode in the room of your choice.

Commodes can be static or mobile, and mobile and can be positioned over the toilet with the commode pan removed. The user and/or carer must ensure that the brakes are used when transferring on/off a wheeled commode. A multi-purpose commode is a simple, lightweight metal frame with a plastic seat and armrests. There is no back support. It can be used as a commode with a plastic pan, as a toilet frame over the toilet to assist with transfers, or as a shower stool.

Some features you may want to consider:

- A wood or metal frame.
- A fixed or adjustable height.
- Freestanding or mobile.
- Single purpose or multi-purpose.
- Standard or chemical.
- Armchair style.
- Folding.

Toilet equipment for children

A wide range of equipment is available for children, dependent on the level of support they require, including commodes, non-standard toilet seats, toilet frames and urinals.

Supportive toilet seats fit to the toilet, but this may limit use by other family members. The size and shape of a toilet bowl may mean that the aperture position for some toilet supports, especially for smaller children, does not align fully with the toilet bowl. A splash guard or ‘skirt’ may limit prevent urine splashing outside of the toilet. Pipes, boxing in and toilet bowl size and shape may all prevent wheeled commodes being used.

Flooring

A bathroom floor is likely to become wet and therefore increase the risk of falls in that area. Tiles for example can become especially slippery when wet. The correct flooring in a bathroom can help to prevent fall-related injuries:

- The bathroom or WC flooring should have an adequate slip-resistant rating which is suitable for the use of the room.
- Floor surfaces should be firm, flush, non-directional and firmly fixed.
- If any of the users of the bathroom have a visual impairment, it is important to ensure that the floor covering does not produce a glare when reflecting the light as this can be disorientating. Patterned flooring should also be avoided
- Sudden changes in colour can be perceived as a step.
- Threshold strips should be carefully chosen so as not to cause a trip hazard or an obstacle for wheelchair users.

Funding bathroom adaptations

Bathroom adaptations can be one of the largest investments you will make in your home and so it's important that the final result suits both your needs and tastes.

In some circumstances, you may be able to receive assistance with the cost and installation of adaptive equipment or home modifications from your local authority.

For an occupational therapy assessment and funded equipment or adaptations, you can get an assessment of your needs and support from social services via your local authority or via GP referral. However, please be advised that waiting lists and eligibility vary greatly from area to area.

If you are self-funding, you may wish to seek advice from a specialist occupational therapist who can offer advice on housing adaptations and equipment to meet your individual needs.

Funding the provision of equipment

Grants and local authority provision

There are a few options available for funding of equipment and minor adaptations, and these can vary across the UK. We provide an overview of the options available here, but it is worthwhile checking what arrangements are in place locally.

Under the Care Act 2014 in England, if you are assessed as requiring a minor home adaptation or preventative intervention (such as a grab rail to help prevent falls), anything costing under £1,000 would be free of charge to you via your local authority.

Health and social care assessment (also known as a needs assessment)

In order to qualify for grants and local authority provision you will need to have a needs assessment. This which will determine whether you have eligible needs for care and support with daily living (such as bathing or toileting) due to age, disability or a long-term health condition. You can get a needs assessment via your local authority's social services department. You can either apply yourself, or someone else can apply on your behalf, with your permission (such as a friend, relative or health professional). You can also get a referral from your GP.

In Scotland, local authorities make their own arrangements for provision of minor adaptations and details can be accessed via your local council website.

Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs)

If the equipment or adaptation required costs more that £1000, you may be eligible to apply for a Disabled Facility Grant to pay for home adaptations. If the work is 'reasonable and practicable' and 'necessary to meet the needs' of a person with a disability. This can include extensions and structural work to accommodate fixed hoists, stairlifts, downstairs bathrooms, shower units etc. You can apply for a grant of up to £30,000 in England, up to £36,000 in Wales and up to £25,000 in Northern Ireland. Conditions for DFGs will vary according to the country in which you live.

To apply for a DFG for housing adaptations, your needs will be assessed by an occupational therapist. They usually come to your home to assess your needs, and this can include a joint assessment together with you and any carer you may have. They can also do assessments over the phone. They will then contact the relevant council departments with any necessary evidence they have gathered that the work proposed is appropriate and meets all the requirements for funding.

Age UK has a factsheet (Factsheet 41. How to get care and support) explaining more about the DFG process.

Disability Rights UK (an organisation run by, and working for, disabled people) has some very comprehensive online information about Disabled Facilities Grants and other housing grants.

NB - Please note that you may not receive any grant if you start work on your property before the council approves your application.

Private purchase

If you are self-funding and need advice before you buy, contact your local disabled/independent living centre where you can have the opportunity to try out a range of equipment. There are several of these around the country where you can go for impartial advice. Your local authority will be able to supply information about where your nearest centre is located. Some retailers have showrooms which have areas set up so you can try out items of equipment to see if they will suit you before you commit to making a purchase.

Also consider if you can afford a service contract for more complex items of equipment. These may seem expensive at first, but in the long run call out fees or replacements may prove to be costly. Some items such as hoists and slings need to be 'LOLER' compliant (Lifting Operations and Lifting Equipment Regulations 1998). This is because they are used to move people mechanically and these checks are a legal requirement every six months. Others with moving parts or electrics will have a service schedule recommended by the manufacturer which is included in the instruction manual.

Before purchasing, look for a sales company that belongs to a trade association, such as the British Healthcare Trades Association (BHTA). The BHTA aims to improve standards in the provision of healthcare and assistive technology. BHTA members have signed up to a Code of Practice which aims to ensure that members provide products and services that are professional, ethical, and trustworthy.

Some suppliers will fit equipment, but some is sold 'supply only'. Finding a tradesman to fit items may not be easy. There may be a local arrangement for fitting small items such as a care and repair service or Home Improvement Agency, or there may be a list of 'trusted traders' provided. Websites such as Checkatrade provide feedback from previous customers which can help you find a reputable service provider and Trading Standards may be able to advice if there are concerns over a company you are considering using.

VAT-exempt purchases

If you have a diagnosed long-term condition, you may be able to claim VAT relief when purchasing equipment. Ask the supplying company or check their website for further information. More information is available on the GOV.UK website.

Equipment suppliers may have the VAT exemption form on their website, or you can download a general form from GOV.UK before you make your purchase. You will need to fill in a form for each supplier you use, but you will only need to do this for the first purchase with them.

Further sources of information and advice about funding

The Money Helper website provides government backed, free, impartial guidance about funding for adaptations.

Age UK has provided a factsheet setting out the help you can get from your local authority if you need the provision of disability equipment and home adaptations.

Charitable funding

If you do not have the funds to buy equipment, it may be possible to request support from a charity. They will usually have criteria which they will apply, and most will not consider equipment which should be provided by the NHS or social services.

Some charities will only consider requests which are supported by an involved professional, usually an occupational therapist, physiotherapist or a nurse. This may require them to be present during the assessment for an item of equipment. This is to ensure that the equipment is appropriate and will not have an impact on planned treatment or rehabilitation programmes.

Equipment is not always purchased outright and gifted to you. Some items are provided on loan, either for a specified length of time, or to be returned when no longer needed or appropriate for use.

A number of charity websites that offer funding are listed here:

- Turn2Us - A national charity that helps people in financial hardship gain access to welfare benefits, charitable grants and support services.
- Scope - A disability equality charity in England and Wales.
- Sense - A charity supporting people who are deafblind or who have complex disabilities.
- Friends of the Elderly - A charity who run a Grant Giving Programme for older people in financial need.

Prescriptions

Following an assessment, some local authorities will issue you with a prescription for the equipment that you need. This can be taken to a local retailer (usually a pharmacy or independent equipment retailer), and you can collect the equipment and begin to use it immediately. There is usually the option to have the equipment delivered to your home if you have difficulty accessing your local retailers.

NB - equipment from social services is provided for use at your home address and should not be used elsewhere as:

1. It is assessed as suitable for use in your home and selected to work within your existing environment and current equipment.
2. They will not be able to respond to breakdowns or repairs.

However, if you are permanently moving home into the area of another local authority, you can take the equipment with you if you still need to use it and it is the most cost-effective solution. You will need to discuss this with the service that issued the equipment to you.

Equipment hire

If your need is short-term, it may be cost effective to hire equipment.

Mobility Hire is a national source for mobility and assistive equipment on hire or purchase. They offer short- or long-term rental solutions to meet most requirements, and equipment ranges from bathroom aids to wheelchairs.

If the equipment is required for a holiday, it is advisable to look for a supplier near to your destination – they will be able to respond to any issues such as a breakdown/breakage.

Community equipment store loan

Small daily living equipment or aids like raised toilet seats, shower chairs or bath lifts can be available via the NHS from a nurse, occupational therapist or physiotherapist or via social services at your local authority.

Loans can either be short-term to assist after an operation or illness, or longer-term to promote independence or support caregiving. Long-term loans are usually the responsibility of social services (either adult social care or children’s services) and will be provided following an assessment by an occupational therapist. Straightforward items, such as raised toilet seats or bath seats and boards can be provided by an occupational therapy assistant or functional assessor. Arrangements vary across the UK, and you may find that local arrangements allow different services to provide equipment on behalf of each other.

Also, equipment may be offered as an alternative to an adaptation. Your occupational therapist will explain why they are making this suggestion.

Disability Living Allowance/Personal Independence Payments/Attendance Allowance

Disability Living Allowance (DLA), Personal Independence Payments (PIP) and Attendance Allowance are benefits available for those who need support with activities of daily living. More information is available from More information is available from the government and Citizens Advice, enabling you to check your eligibility if you are not already claiming one of these benefits.

Further advice from us

Living Made Easy

For clear, practical advice and information on products and suppliers of daily living equipment, please have a look at our Living Made Easy website which is the largest aids to daily living database in Europe.

AskSARA

If you would like help choosing equipment for everyday living, you could try our free online self-assessment tool, AskSARA.

AskSARA is an award-winning online self-help guide providing expert advice and information on products and equipment for older and disabled people. The tool will ask you questions about yourself and your environment and then offer relevant advice, product suggestions and supplier details. AskSARA is licensed for use through local authorities, and you can check if your local authority provides access to AskSARA here: https://asksara.livingmadeeasy.org.uk/about-ask-sara

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