

Glenn Haege: The Handyman

Modifications help seniors stay in their homes

Aging in place is a popular topic these days. Most people would prefer to stay in their home as they age rather than moving to a senior-living community. However, most homes need modifications to make things more comfortable and safe as we age.

When people consider modifications, they often think of adding ramps and wider doorways to accommodate walkers or wheelchairs. But there are many other things you can do around the house to meet the needs of an aging population.

- For example, as we age, our eyesight gets poorer. One of the first things I recommend is to improve the home's lighting. Adding track and recessed lighting, under-cabinet lighting and large fluorescent fixtures throughout the house is fairly inexpensive, but it will improve convenience and safety.

- Another area that often needs change is the bathroom. Getting in and out of the bathtub can be a chore and dangerous for many people. Frank Mathison of Mathison Plumbing Supply, (734) 522-5633, says he is seeing a lot of customers replace their old tub with a walk-in bath or barrier-free shower system that is available from Best Bath Systems, www.best-bath.com. He says while these can be pricey, the advantage is that if you decide to sell the home in the future, the tub or shower can be changed back to a more traditional style. He says the less costly solution many of his customers choose is installing rails, grab bars and shower seats instead of spending the money on a new tub or shower.

"Many people install grab bars that are 1 1/2 half inches in diameter, but we find that 1 1/4 inches is better for seniors, because the smaller size fits their hands better," Mathison says.

WingIts, (877) 894-6448, www.wingits.com, is another company that offers grab bars, shower seats, tub benches and other bath accessories to make bathing easier and safer for seniors. In addition, the company has a patented fastening technology that ensures the grab bars are sturdy and safe after installation.

Jeff Oslund, owner of Rebath of Michigan, (888) 732-2844, www.rebathit.com, says if you want to replace the tub, but want a more cost-effective solution, his company offers a tub-to-shower conversion. With this option, Rebath will take out the old tub and install a new shower, including grab bars and a shower seat, for around \$5,000 versus the \$8,000 to \$20,000 cost of replacing it with a new walk-in tub. Jeff said that 60 percent of his business these days is the tub-to-shower conversion. Most of his customers are empty-nesters or people who want to stay in their home as they age.

- No matter what tub or shower solution you choose, another thing that can be harmful to seniors is being scalded by hot water during a shower. In most homes, flushing a toilet or running the dishwasher when someone is showering can change the temperature of the shower's water dramatically.

To avoid scalding, Jim Kronk of Universal Plumbing Supply, (248) 542-3888, universalplumbingsupply.net, recommends thermostatic-shower valves. They let you pre-set the temperature, and the technology ensures that water coming out of the shower head will always remain the same temperature.

You also can install touchless faucets in the bathroom and kitchen that work with infrared technology and turn on or off with the wave of your hand.

They are common in many commercial buildings, and make it easier for older folks, especially those with arthritis. Most major manufacturers offer these types of thermostatic-shower valves and touchless faucets. Check out Delta, (800) 345 3358, www.deltafaucet.com; Kohler, (800) 456-4537, www.kohler.com; and Grohe, (630) 582-7711, www.groheamerica.com.

Mathison says many of his customers are also interested in installing higher toilets for increased comfort and ease-of-use as they age. He said standard toilets are 15 inches high, but he is getting a lot of requests for toilets that are 16 1/2 inches high, or even the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)-approved 17-inch toilet height.

- The kitchen is another room that often needs some modifications, and Kraft Maid, (888) 562-7744, www.kraftmaid.com, has a line of kitchen cabinets, the Passport Series, that is designed for improved usability and convenience for those with physical or height limitations. These cabinets also meet specifications recommended by the ADA.

- While these practical solutions are often all that is needed to help improve comfort and safety for seniors, there also are some unique, pricier solutions. For instance, a home elevator from Pneumatic Vacuum Elevators, (305) 235-6707, www.vacuumelevators.com. These two- to four-stop elevators are pulled up by a vacuum technology and return to the first floor on an air cushion.

If you were to do all of these modifications, it could get expensive. Choosing just a few of them goes a long way to help you and your loved ones age in place.

If you have a question, call the Handyman Show with Glenn Haege at (866) ASK GLENN from noon-2 p.m. Saturday or Sunday. The show can be heard on WJR-AM (760) and more than 160 radio stations nationwide. To suggest a question for Haege's Wednesday Ask Glenn column, e-mail askglenn@masterhandyman.com.