

Bathroom Safety for the Elderly



Home Economics • Cooperative Extension Service • Oklahoma State University

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The bathroom is a place where a lot of time is spent on the daily grooming routine. More and more bathrooms are designed for luxury and relaxation. Therefore it is necessary to make this place safe and comfortable.

Bathrooms can be hazardous places for people of all ages. Slippery walking spaces and limited room make the bathroom an accident prone area. The problem becomes more pronounced when elderly are considered. The elderly often experience physical declines such as failing vision and reduced mobility, which can make bathroom spaces more difficult to maneuver.

Because of the risk of mishap, bathrooms must have special consideration in the homes of the elderly.

Preventing Slips and Falls

According to the National Safety Council falling is the second leading cause of accidental death among those aged 65 to 74. Although falls affect and injure people of all ages, those that are elderly are more at risk both because of physical disabilities and reduced healing capacity.

Falls are one of the most common bathroom accidents. Slippery floors, tubs, and shower surfaces can be hazardous. In the shower or tub, one should use non-slip suction mats or non-slip decals and appliques. This will help prevent falls from occurring while getting in and out of the tub.

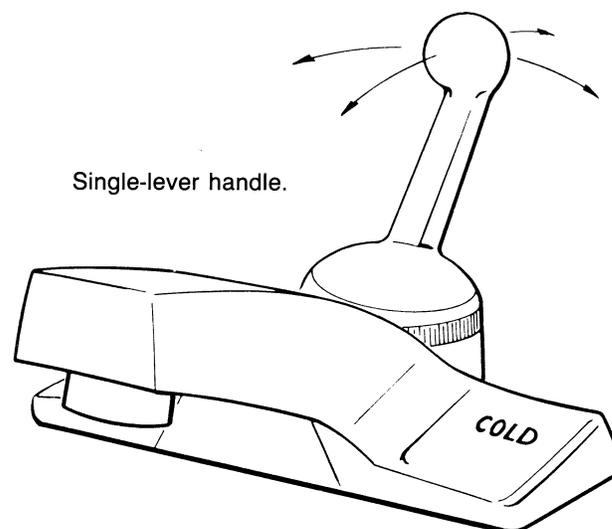
Do not use throw rugs or bathmats as floor coverings. These can slip or be easily

tripped over. Instead, a non-skid latex-coated bathmat is advisable. Low pile, commercial carpet or matte-finished, textured tile is recommended as a floor covering.

To help reduce slips, wait until the bathtub is completely drained of soap suds and water before leaving. A dry surface is easier to negotiate.

Hot Water Settings and Handles

As persons age, their skin sensitivity decreases, thereby reducing their ability to detect pain. Although a person may be hurting themselves, they may not register pain immediately. This delayed reaction time between occurrence and detection can cause serious injury. To protect the elderly from a serious burn or scald, control the hot water temperature in the home. The hot water temperature should be set at a maximum of 120°.



Single-lever handle.

To assist in handling, choose a single lever mixing faucet that controls both water pressure and temperature in bath and sink area. This makes control adjustments simpler. Another suggestion is a hand held shower hose. This allows the aged individual greater control over water direction.

Grab or Safety Bars

For added safety, grab bars can be located around the toilet, tub and shower area of the bathroom.

All bars should be made of stainless steel and installed according to the manufacturer's direction for firm, solid support. Some grab bars are attached through the tile, to structural supports in the wall. Others are fastened to the sides of the bathtub. You may want to retain a professional for installation if you are unfamiliar with the process. Various types of grab bars are available. The choice of bars depends on the abilities of the person using the bars, the available wall space and the plumbing arrangements.

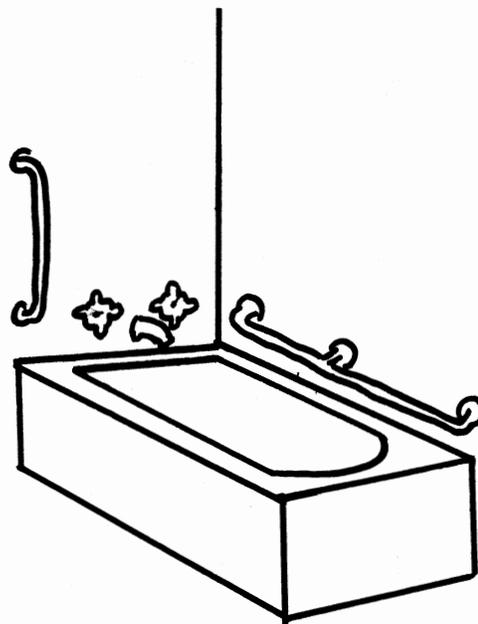
Grab bars are expensive, but should never be substituted with towel rods or other devices not designed specifically as bathroom aids. Substitutes are not strong enough to support the weight or pressure of an individual leaning on them.

Grab bars should be three-fourths inch to one inch in diameter, and mounted to withstand a pull of 500 pounds.

Tub Grab Bars

Vertical and horizontal grab bars are called for at the tub area. They will aid individuals in entering or leaving the tub area and lowering or raising the body to and from seated positions.

To allow for safety while getting in and out of the tub, attach a vertical "U" grab bar at the foot of the tub. (The foot of the tub is the end where the water faucets and drain are located.) The vertical bar should be placed near the outer edge of the tub and should be about 32 inches in length.



Horizontal bars are most effective when used for raising or lowering the body to or from a seated position in the tub. The locations of horizontal grab bars are often the foot of the tub and length of the back wall of the tub.

It is not advisable to have "U" diagonal grab bars. This is because an elderly person's hand could slide on the diagonal bar. If the person's footing was not secure, a serious fall might result.

Vertical Poles and Angle Bars

If the tub is a free-standing tub, as in many older homes, a vertical pole may be used on the access side of the tub. This would provide support for entering and leaving the tub. The diameter of the pole should be 1 1/2 inches, and should extend from floor to ceiling.

For persons needing two hands to enter and leave the tub, angle bars can help. Angle bars may be used when one or both ends of the tub are enclosed by a wall. An angle bar is attached to the back wall, to the side wall, and then to the floor. Angle bars can also be attached to shower walls to provide support. Additionally, angle bars can also be an aid to sitting and rising if a bath bench or chair is used.

Toilet Grab Bars

Grab bars are placed around toilets for security and support. The bars help steady and support an elderly person and also aid in sitting. Bars here should be able to withstand a 250 pound load.

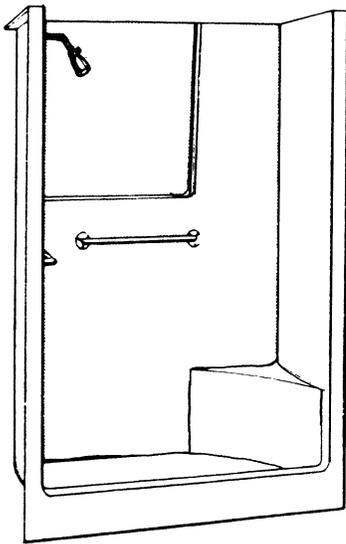
The type of grab bars you choose will depend on the amount of wall space near the toilet, the nearness of other fixtures in the room, and the needs of the persons in the household, and plumbing arrangements.

There are many types of grab bars available. Some are:

- Wall mounted (side wall)
- Wall mounted (back wall behind toilet)
- Wall/floor mounted
- Free standing
- Floor model
- Slipcover guard rails

Bathroom Seating

Elderly people tire easily and it is important that they have a place in the bathroom area to rest. If the bathroom space allows, a sit-down vanity is recommended. If there isn't space, try to locate a stool near the bathtub or shower area. The toilet can be used as a seat to assist a person while entering the tub.



Seating can also be helpful inside the tub or shower. A variety of portable seats, chairs, and benches are available. When using tub/

shower seats, a hand-held shower head makes bathing easier. The location of a shower or tub seat should be on the opposite side of the controls. Be sure any chair or bench used has non-slip rubber tips on the legs. Also test the seating for stability, safety and comfort.

Toilets

Many elderly people have arthritis, hip, knee, or back ailments. For these persons, the standard 15 to 17 inch high toilet seats can cause a problem. This distance can cause problems when trying to lower onto or rise from the toilet. By elevating the toilet seat 5 to 7 inches the person will have better leverage with which to rise to a standing position.

There are several types of raised toilet seats. Some can be permanently attached while others are removable.

Two examples of removable seats are a molded plastic seat that can increase height by 4 inches or an adjustable seat that increases in height by 3 to 6 inches. These can be purchased from supply companies. A more permanent way to raise the toilet is to have a plumber put the stool on a wooden platform made to fit the toilet base.

Accessories

Bathroom accessories should be safe, too. Soap dishes should be recessed in order to avoid injury. Medicine chests should be recessed and within easy reach. Sliding doors are preferable to pull out doors, and unbreakable shelves are recommended. The entire room should be evenly lit and without glare. This is important because the elderly have a decreased sensitivity to light but an increased sensitivity to glare. A light switch located near the door can prevent accidents that may occur from walking through a dark room. The better the lighting is, the safer the bathroom space will be. A safe supplemental heat source and ventilation system in the bathroom is also advisable.

Accessibility

Accessibility is essential when adapting or examining a bathroom intended for the elderly. There should be at least one full bath on the first level of a home that is accessible to those unable to climb stairs. The size of the bathroom should be large enough to accommodate two people (about 50-60 square feet). In addition, the bathroom should be large enough for the maneuvering of a wheel chair (about 5 feet diameter).

The door to the bathroom should open outward, in case someone falls against it inside. This will allow access to the elderly person. Also the door threshold should be flush with no door sills. Door sills are dangerous because they can be easily tripped over. Doorways should be large enough to accommodate a wheel chair distance.

Summary

Safety is of great concern to the elderly. By making the older person's home safe, we can contribute to greater comfort and peace of mind.

In addition to making the bathroom a safe accident free place, don't forget to make this space aesthetically pleasing. Colorful towels, floors, and walls help make this space more cheerful and comfortable for the user.

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