

Modifying Your Home for Independence

As people go about completing tasks in their homes everyday, it is important that the environment be appropriate and allow for the greatest degree of independence. When the environment doesn't "fit" the individual living or working in it, modifications can be made to facilitate independence. Changes also can be made for older adults and people with disabilities to accommodate their ability and changes in health. A home modified for greater accessibility promotes energy conservation and helps prevent falls and other in-home injuries.

Occupational therapists have expertise and training in recommending and implementing strategies in every room in the home that could help a person complete daily tasks effectively and efficiently no matter the degree of his or her ability. These strategies can help a person live independently for many years.

What can an occupational therapist recommend?

- **Evaluation of** a person's ability and determine whether his or her home environment fits the person to maintain maximum independence.
- **In the bathroom**, replacing the toilet with a higher model or a longer seat for people in wheelchairs or with limited hip movement. Install handheld shower heads, large shower and bath controls, and grab bars around the bathtub walls. Install faucets with a lever control for people with a weak grip. Identify design features that will promote safety and comfort.
- **In the kitchen**, lowering sinks and countertops to accommodate wheelchairs. Store often-used items in easy-to-reach places. Design work space that accommodates seated activities, such as lower countertops with beveled, rounded corners.
- **In hallways and doorways**, creating clear, unobstructed openings that a person in a wheelchair or with a cane can pass through easily. Create entryways and hallways with a 32-inch clearance. Ensure

that thresholds are level with the floor. Install secure carpets or runners in hallways or stairwells to provide traction, and install handrails for gripping.

- **In the living room and bedroom**, arranging furniture so that it creates open space and clear passage. Place the bed where it is easily accessible to a person in a wheelchair. Place the telephone where it is easily accessible. If a person is likely to wander, install locks on exit doors.
- **Increase** home security if a person is likely to wander.

What can families do?

- **Investigate** and suggest resources that can help an older person or someone with a disability to remain independent in the home.
- **Help** facilitate a person's independence by helping them access necessary community resources.
- **Introduce** changes at a slow pace to cause as little disruption as possible.
- **Ensure** that the contractor and builder you choose are licensed and insured.

Need more information?

Home modification can provide an alternative to older adults and people with disabilities that can allow them to live in their own homes as long as possible. Occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants are trained in helping both adults and children with a broad range of physical, developmental, and

psychological conditions. Practitioners also help clients in wellness techniques that may prevent injury and disease. If you would like to consult an occupational therapist, practitioners are available through most hospitals, medical centers, and community clinics.