

Can Your Home Be Safer Without Spending a Fortune?

BY JAN BLAUSTONE



If you aren't ready just yet to design and build that perfect dream home, there are a lot of things you can do in the meantime to solve everyday dilemmas.

Besides providing low-cost solutions to some of your home accessibility problems, these suggestions are also geared to safety. Unsafe home configurations can lead to falls for people with many chronic diseases, including MS. And falls can lead to injury or further loss of independence. These solutions address some common challenges and may help you stay as healthy and independent as possible.

Although Medicare and private insurance don't cover most of the useful devices and techniques listed here, they're often inexpensive to buy or replicate at home.

Rather than waiting to make changes after an injury, or because your mobility has been limited by disease progression, consider some of these ideas right now.

Let's take a tour around the house and see what we can do.

This article focuses on safety issues for people with symptoms, but home safety is a serious issue for everyone. According to **Prevention Magazine**, the majority of broken hips happen at home—because of falls by people of all ages and abilities. —*The Editor*

Doors

Do you find round doorknobs difficult to turn, especially when using one hand? You can replace such knobs with L-shaped lever handles or, for about the same cost, you

can buy an easy-to-install knob adapter. Adapters that fit over most round doorknobs sell for \$12 to \$25. Lever handles make much easier work for your service dog, too! (www.dynamic-living.com)

Have a doorway you can't fit through when you use a walker or wheelchair? Before you hire a demolition crew, try replacing your door hinges with wrap-around or swing-clear specialty hinges.



DYNAMICLIVING.COM

Wrap-around hinge

Available in a variety of finishes at hardware stores, the hinges range from \$20 to \$25 each. (www.adaptiveaccess.com—among others)

Floors

Hard-surfaced flooring is safest. But whether you have tile, wood, concrete or carpeted floors, be sure to eliminate throw rugs and move exposed electrical cords. They can trip up your step or get caught in your wheels.



LINDUSTRIES

Knob adapter

Hallways and bathrooms

Grab bars are a sensible addition to any home, but not all walls were built with the necessary reinforcement to install them.

Try a portable grab bar like the Grabit (great for traveling), a 13-inch bar you can position anywhere—even in a car. It mounts by flipping two levers that provide a powerful suction cup hold to any smooth surface; it sells for \$65. (www.grabitonline.com)

A second option is a fastening system that permanently installs a grab bar into any wall without the need for additional structural support. This one-of-a-kind fastening hardware called WingIt installs in minutes and exceeds applicable federal regulations, national building codes, and ADA guidelines. Price per WingIt is \$18 to \$26. (www.wingits.com)

Toilet options

Yes, there are toilet options. The universal, raised toilet seat is most economical and lightweight, selling for as low as \$20 on www.dynamic-living.com, and it's great for traveling. It's dishwasher-safe and will raise existing seat height from 2 to 13 inches.

If you want to install a new toilet (go for the tall 18-inch elongated style) in a new location without drilling into your flooring, compare the cost of conventional installation with this solution: Recommend the motorized Qwik Jon pump system by Zoeller to your contractor or plumber—it can be used with a variety of

toilet styles without the need to destroy flooring.

It pumps in any direction, is leak-proof and odorless, and fits just about anywhere. All you need is a level surface for this free-standing system that can be hidden; approximate dimensions are 42-inch height, 18-inch depth and 24-inch width. The cost is \$700 to \$1,000. (www.zoeller.com/zcopump/Products/homeimprove/qwikjonUltima.htm)



Qwik Jon by Zoeller

Safer showering

In addition to grab bars, there are three key ingredients to safe and accessible showering:

- A hand-held showerhead
- A shower seat
- A non-slip rubber shower mat

Hand-held showerhead packages range from \$16 to \$300 (most are under \$100) at home improvement stores and on the Internet. They're easy to install, and the pulsating models are wonderful for hands-free hair rinsing. Some include a vertical slide bar and grab bar. See www.dynamic-living.com.

A sturdy transfer shower bench with backrest and reversible armrest is indispensable



Combo grab and slide bar

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able for use in a tub or shower stall. Many types are offered, starting at \$65 to \$150 at home improvement stores, medical supply houses, and on the Web. More specialized or longer-lasting ones, made of rust-proof stainless steel, with sliding bench and toileting features, go for several hundred dollars. (Medical supply houses may charge a bit more but often have personnel familiar with disability issues who can offer informed advice.)

For mats, look for a half-inch thick rubber floor mat; it's ideal for heavy wheelchairs and provides a secure hold in slippery environments. A 2-by-3-foot model sells for about \$18.

Beds

Bed too tall? Many beds today are very tall—24 to 30 inches including an 18-inch mattress set—and, without an elevator seat, they can be difficult to transfer to from an 18- or 19-inch wheelchair seat. You can make your bed lower with a common \$99 low-profile metal bed frame, which is lower than a modern bedroom-set frame.

Bed too low? (Try www.bedframeparts.com.) If you have an older 12-to-15-inch mattress set and need to make your bed taller for easier access, furniture risers may be your answer. They come in wood or heavy-duty plastic. Available at home improvement stores or online, they sell for \$10 to \$25 for a set of four. They also work on sofas, tables, and large chairs.

Another common problem in rising

from a bed or sofa is having nothing to grab onto for support. A portable handrail can be your solution. Several designs are on the market; some include a caddy for remotes, books, and such. They usually have a frame that fits between upper and lower mattresses, making a secure, firm hold for gripping. Very abundant online, they sell for around \$50.

Kitchen and study

Whether you're working in the kitchen, at a desk, reading in bed, or simply eating a casual meal, a portable table is a must-have. There are a variety on the market that tilt in either direction, raise and lower

easily, move on wheels, and aren't bad-looking. Prices begin around \$45.

Faucets

Reaching kitchen or bathroom faucets can be frustrating when your motor skills are impaired and/or you're sitting at standard wheelchair level.

First, you should be able to get considerably closer by opening the doors and putting your feet into the cabinet below the sink. You may need to remove the little vertical bar in between your cabinet doors. Be sure to wrap your plumbing with insulation so you won't nudge your knees up against a hot pipe.

Can your home be better connected?

Home is where the computer is these days. Are you getting the most out of yours? Computers really are a bit like brains; we tend to use only the familiar parts, leaving vast areas untapped.

If you have problems reading text on screen, handling a mouse, or remembering important tasks or events, go to mymsmyway.com, the Web site of the new MS Technology Collaborative. The collaborative wants to raise awareness of how much computer technology (and other technology too) can be flexed to meet changing needs.

For starters, with a little instruction, provided online through the "My Way" portal, anyone can learn to:

- Alter screen settings to enlarge the size or change the appearance of text;

- Move cursors with keys or a trackball instead of clicking a mouse;
- Have hard-to-see text read out loud.

On the "My Way" home page, under Benefits of Technology, click "Learn More." Then click the link to Microsoft's Accessibility site (www.microsoft.com/enable) at the bottom of the page.

You'll find tutorials for many programs and features, including ways to adapt browsers, e-mail programs, calendar features, and more. The information and tips are all intended to support technology needs and to help people build their computer skills.

For more about the MS Technology Collaborative, see the news story on page 28.

myMS » **myWAY.com**

Or, remove the lower cabinet doors and any shelves, and screw on a board at an angle from the outer cabinet edge in front to the lower cabinet floor in back.

If hand dexterity is an issue, replace your faucet with a lever faucet, single handle, or even a touch-free faucet. While most lever faucet handles are relatively inexpensive (\$30 to \$80), a touch-free faucet costs about \$300. But you can get an adapter for around \$100 from your home improvement store or online. Touch-free faucets save water and stop germ transfers.



Low vision adaptations

Identify steps, stairs, drop-offs, and edges by using a bright color paint and a texture provided by sand additives. Paint the edge of each step, the top and bottom of ramps, and the edges of walkways. The edges of doorways and windows can be identified by having the molding done

in a dark color if the walls are light, or in white if the walls are bright colors.

Maximize contrast wherever you work. Use light-colored cutting boards when

preparing dark food, and dark boards for pale foods. A dark non-skid mat or towel under a container often helps you see what you're doing. Read about other low-vision adaptations in the Society's **At Home with MS: Adapting Your Environment**. To read this booklet online,

go to nationalmssociety.org, click on **Library** in the menu bar at the top of the screen, then scroll down and click on **Brochures**. Or call your chapter for a copy. ■

Jan Blaustone is a writer, speaker, teacher, and artist whose work focuses on family life and disability issues. This article is adapted from "Keeping Your Home Safe and Accessible," in the September–October 2006 issue of **QUEST**, with the kind permission of the Muscular Dystrophy Association.

Resources:

Grabit
www.grabitonline.com
800-542-5076

WingIts
www.wingits.com
877-894-6448

Qwick Jon
www.zoeller.com
800-928-PUMP

Online suppliers:
www.blvd.com is an Internet superstore for enabling products.

More information about adaptive products:

Abledata
www.abledata.com
800-227-0216

And go to nationalmssociety.org/Modifications for more ideas.

Don't have Internet? Call your chapter for a free copy of **At Home with MS**.