

Design Your Cabin for Accessibility

During the process of planning your cabin design, you'll probably be thinking of all the good times you'll spend there. Like many of us, you might envision cozy evenings at the cabin after a day of hiking, skiing, hunting, boating, fishing, or snowmobiling.

But have you considered the possibility that you might not always be able bodied? It can happen to anyone: a car accident, a sports injury, an illness. Any of us can find ourselves dependent on crutches, or rolling around in a wheelchair.

And of course, nobody is getting any younger! Many of us will experience mobility challenges as we grow older.

Given these realities, why not think about designing your cabin in a way that will allow you to spend time there even if you're not in the best of health? It would be a shame to be locked out of using your cabin just because you have a medical problem that makes it difficult to get around. Designing a cabin for a person with impaired mobility isn't hard to do, and if you follow a few simple guidelines and use common sense, your design doesn't need to be prohibitively expensive nor must it be unattractive.

Keep it simple

Unless you have reason to assume a family member will experience permanent mobility impairment, you'll probably want to stop short of installing special cabinetry and special kitchen and bathroom fixtures designed for handicapped people, because these can drive up the cost of building your cabin. You can do a lot to make it possible for a mobility-impaired individual to live pretty comfortably at your cabin even if you don't install special features in the kitchen and bathroom.

Guidelines

If your cabin layout has more than one level, you'll probably want to address accessibility issues on the main level only. The idea is to plan the main level of the cabin in a way that would make it possible for you to live comfortably on that level if you had to. At a minimum, this means the main level of the cabin should have a bathroom and should also have at least one room that could serve as a bedroom.

Think about how you will enter the cabin and how you'll move around inside. You'll want to make sure hallways and passageways are at least 36 inches wide, if possible. If your cabin design just doesn't allow enough space for hallways and passageways that wide, a 32-inch width is acceptable, though not ideal.

Doors should be at least 36 inches wide. If you don't have room for 36-inch doors for all your downstairs rooms, you should at least make sure the bathroom and bedroom doors have a width not less than 36 inches.

Speaking of doors: levers are a better choice than doorknobs because levers are easier to grasp and manipulate. Likewise, kitchen and bathroom faucets should have levers instead of knobs – or better yet, you can install “touchless” faucets. A touchless faucet has a sensor that turns the water on automatically when your hands are in front of the spigot. Touchless faucets address the challenge of mobility impairment and also offer a couple other advantages: 1) since there’s no touching by dirty hands, touchless faucets make for a healthier life at your cabin by cutting down on transmission of germs among family members, 2) you’ll use less water, because the water flow stops automatically as soon as you move your hands away.

When you're planning the bathroom’s layout, try to leave enough floor space so it would be easy to move around if your locomotion were impaired. You'll also want to give some thought to the direction in which the door swings. Ideally, you'll want the bathroom laid out so a person in a wheelchair could enter the bathroom, close the door, use all the facilities in the bathroom, open the door, and leave the bathroom. This means you'll need a tub or shower that's not too difficult to get into and out of. A walk-in shower is something you might want to consider, if you have enough space. A fully tiled walk-in shower can be very desirable in terms of aesthetics and can also be easy to use for a person that has trouble getting around.

Try to plan your kitchen in a way that would allow a wheelchair to move around easily, without bumping into things.

Hope for the best and plan for the worst

In summary: when designing your cabin, hope for the best and plan for the worst! Someday you might be glad you did.