Texas Cooperative EXTENSION
The Texas A&M University System

Bathroom Safety for Older People

Home bathrooms often need adaptation if an elderly person wants to stay at home and remain independent. Ensuring bathroom access and safety may require room adaptations.

Bath

Bathtub

Falls often occur as people get in or out of the tub. Non-slip, suction mats (Fig. 1) or rubber silicone appliques (Fig. 2) in the tub will help prevent falls.

A non-skid, latex-coated bath mat on the floor beside the tub provides firm footing.

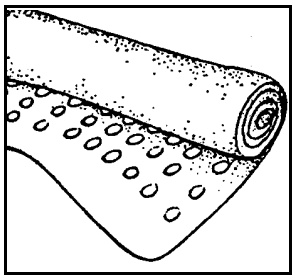


Fig. 1 Suction bathtub mat

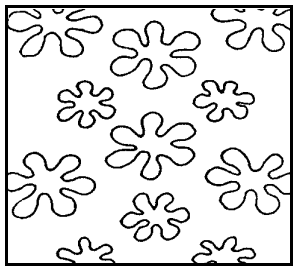


Fig. 2 Bathtub appliques

Safety Bars

Grab bars around the bathtub are required for the safety of older persons. These bars should be institutional-grade stainless steel and installed according to the manufacturer's directions for firm, solid support. These bars are expensive, but under no circumstance should towel rods or improperly installed grab bars be used as bathtub aids. They will not support a person who loses balance.

Different types of bars and poles are available from plumbing supply companies. The type, number, and positioning of supports depend on:

- the wall space around the tub;
- the wall structure;
- the plumbing arrangements; and
- the disability, if any, of the person(s) using the tub.

Two types of grab bars usually are needed at the tub for the ambulant older person:

- for use in getting in and out of the tub from a *standing position*;
- for use when lowering or raising the body to or from a *seated position* in the tub.

"U" shaped bars are available in 12- to 14-inch lengths. They may be secured vertically or horizontally to a wall.

A vertically placed "U" bar, attached to the side wall at the foot of the tub, allows safe entry and exit. (The foot of the tub is the end where the water faucets and drain are located.) This vertical bar should be about 32-inches long, and placed near the outer tub edge.

Horizontally placed support bars (Fig. 3) are best for lowering or raising the body to or from the seated position in the tub. A 12- to 15- inch bar may be placed at the foot end of the tub and a longer one along the back wall.

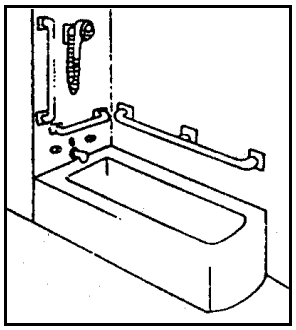


Fig. 3 Horizontal bars

Diagonally placed grab bars (Fig. 4) are not recommended because the hand may slide and if footing is not secure, falls are more likely.

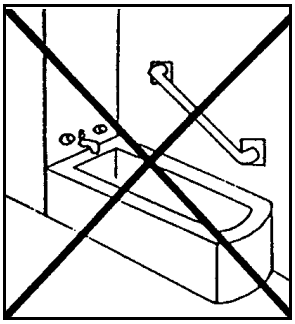


Fig. 4 Diagonal bars

If the tub is free-standing at both ends (as in many older homes) and the end wall is too far for grab bar placement, a vertically placed pole (Fig. 5) on the access side of the tub may be used. This pole should be about 1 ½ -inch diameter, and extend from floor to ceiling. Position it between 1-foot 3-inches to 1-foot 6 inches in from the end of the tub, and close enough to the access side to reach from a seated position. It also can be used to grasp with one hand while operating the water controls.

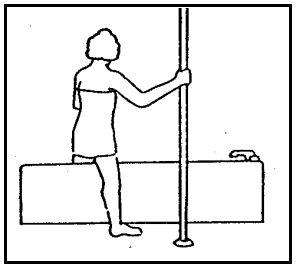


Fig. 5 Vertical bars

Angle bars (Fig. 6) from the back wall (behind the tub) to the floor, with wall posts, may be used when one or both tub ends are enclosed by a wall. This is useful for persons needing to use both hands to enter or exit the tub, or if other people with varying dysfunctions also use the tub.

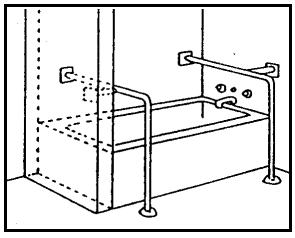


Fig. 6 Angle bars

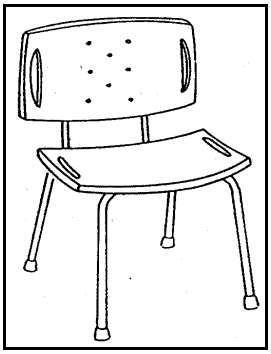
Tub Seats

A variety of portable seats, chairs, and benches are available, if sitting on the bathtub floor is difficult or impossible.

One seat has side flanges that adjust to fit any shape and size tub.

Inside-the-tub chairs (Fig. 7) with backs for greater comfort are available.

Fig. 7 Tub Chair



An inside/outside transfer bench (Fig. 8) with adjustable legs allows the bather to sit on the bench that extends outside the tub, then slide to the inside of the tub.

Any chair or bench must have non-slip rubber tips on the legs, and be safe and comfortable.

When using these seats in the tub, a hand-held shower head (Fig. 9) is almost a necessity to direct the water where needed.

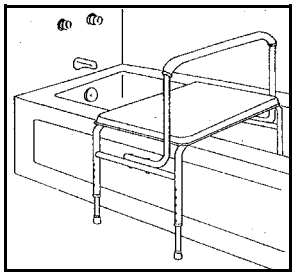
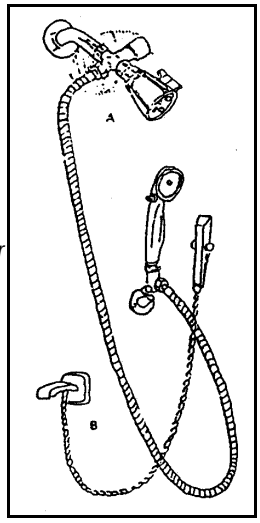


Fig. 8 Transfer bench

Fig. 9 Flexible shower arm



Showers

An angle bar (Fig. 10) attached to two walls provides support while standing to shower, or as an aid to sitting and rising if using a bath bench or chair.

If the shower floor is slippery, nonslip suction mats or rubber silicone treads (Fig. 1, 2) should be used.

A non-skid bath mat on the floor outside the shower is a necessity.

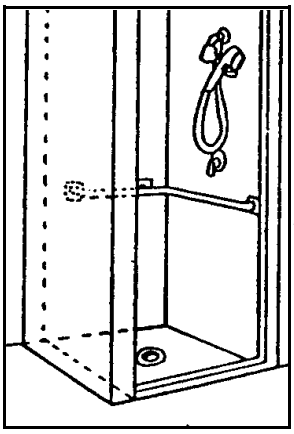


Fig. 10 Angle bar

Toilets

Elevated

The standard 15- to 17-inch height of toilet seats creates a problem for many people, especially those with arthritis, hip, knee, or back problems.

Elevating the seat 5 to 7 inches will give better leverage in regaining a standing position.

There are several types of removable and permanently fixed raised toilet seats that can be purchased from supply companies.

Two examples are:

- a molded plastic seat (Fig. 11) is the simplest way to increase seat height by about 4 inches.
- an adjustable seat (Fig. 12) will add 3 to 6 inches of height.

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 bowl base (Fig. 13).

If building a new bathroom, consider a wall-hung toilet (Fig. 14) that can be hung at any height.

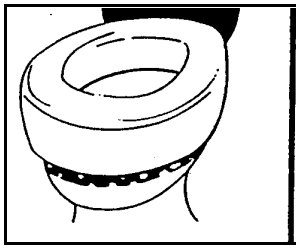


Fig. 11 Molded plastic seat

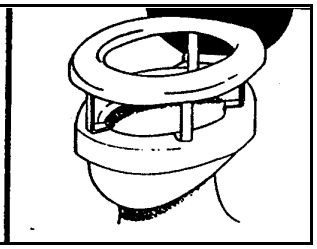


Fig. 12 Adjustable seat

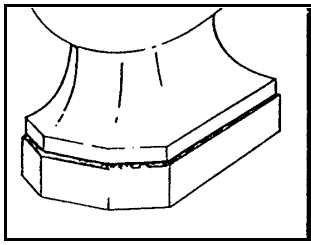


Fig. 13 Raised toilet seat

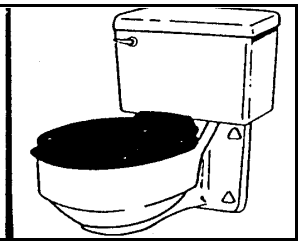


Fig. 14. Wall-hung toilet

Special Feature

A special unit (portable bidet) for cleaning the perineal area without hands or paper may be attached to any standard toilet bowl (Fig. 15). It is an electrically powered unit with a mechanism for spray washing with warm water and drying with a flow of warm air. This promotes independence for persons with very limited hand/arm functions.

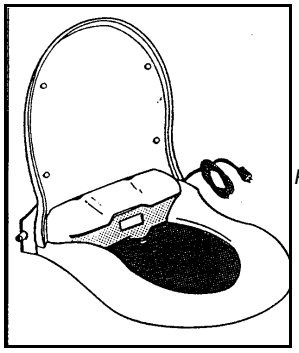


Fig. 15 Portable bidet

Grab Bars

Grab bars around the toilets are for safety. Many types are available. The choice will depend on:

1. Available wall space near the toilet.
2. Nearness to other fixtures in the room.
3. Needs of people in the household.

Basic types of toilet support bars include:

- Wall mounted on a side wall (Fig. 6)
- Wall mounted on the back wall behind the toilet (Fig. 16)
- Wall/floor mounted (Fig. 17)
- Free standing (Fig. 18)
- Floor model (Fig. 19)
- Slip-over guard rails (Fig. 20)

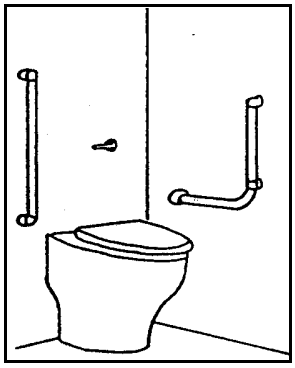


Fig. 16 Side and back mounted bars

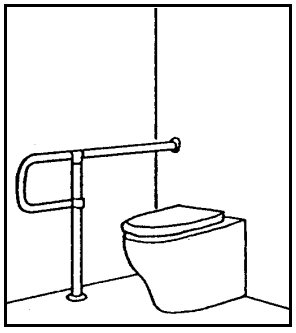


Fig. 17 Wall/floor mounted

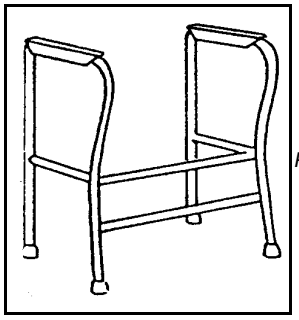


Fig. 18 Free standing

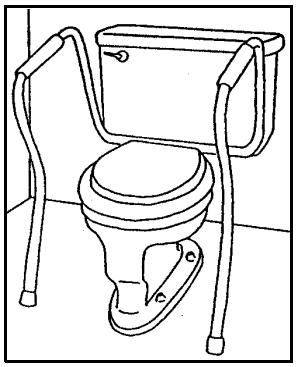


Fig. 19 Floor model

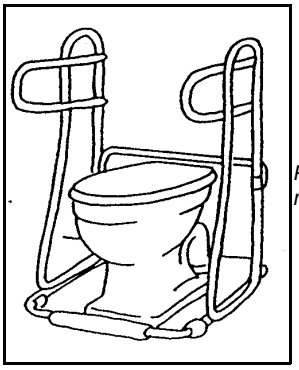


Fig. 20 Slip-over guard rails

Other Safety Features

A single lever mixing faucet (Fig. 21) can control temperature and flow of water better than dual controls.

All hot water in the older person's home should be controlled thermostatically to a maximum temperature of 120 degrees to avoid burns.

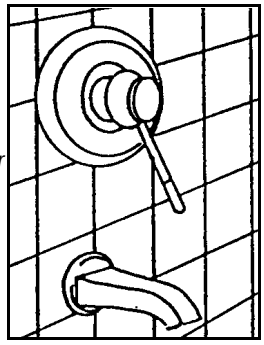


Fig. 21 Single lever faucet

Get Professional Help for Safety!

 # If you have a physical limitation, weakness or unsteadiness, we recommend you consult a physical therapist or the Housing Specialist in your local Cooperative Extension Office to help you select and recommend placement of grab bars and other accessories for safety in the bathroom.

 # If you are unsure of your wall structure or do not have proper tools or skills, we suggest you hire a carpenter to install and/or make the new adaptations.

Source: University of Missouri Extension Guide #7060.