

Renovation independence

Modifications can make homes safer

Jenne Brammer

Most existing homes are not designed to accommodate older people as frailty takes its toll, but making some modifications can mean staying at home safely and independently for longer.

Think of the difference certain modifications could make. Those unsteady on their feet could certainly benefit from a level walk-in shower and a few grab rails, while better lighting would be helpful to people with poor eyesight. If you suddenly find yourself in a wheelchair or using a mobility aid, wider doors, ramps, lower kitchen benches and an accessible bathroom would drastically enhance independence, and lifestyle.

Independent Living Centre WA chief executive Gerri Clay said there were on average about five barriers in the home, and about 50 per cent of difficulties with daily activities could be overcome through effective home modifications.

Joint research by the ILC, Curtin University and WA Home and Community Care found the most frequently obtained home modifications included lighting installations, facilitators to self-care such as bathroom and kitchen accessories, and things that will help mobility and accessibility such as ramps and handrails.

Certainly there's plenty of innovations that can be chosen, ensuring all possible needs are met. A national database of equipment and technologies contains well over 10,000 products. Many of these are on display at ILC's Nedlands display and the new Smart Living centre in Cockburn.

MOST FREQUENTLY OBTAINED HOME MODIFICATIONS

Lighting
With ailing eyesight, getting the best lighting possible both internally and externally can minimise the risk of falling. Lighting can be automated, remotely or by sensor control.

Self-care facilitators: bathroom and kitchen
Things most people take for granted such as using the toilet and stepping over the shower hob can be a struggle when ageing takes its toll.

Creating walk-in baths or showers, where there is no need to step over a hob, and a toilet positioned at the right height with ample access, are among the main changes that can increase independence. These need not look ugly and clinical — there are plenty of attractive designs on the market.

There are also plenty of modifications that can be done in the kitchen. Measures such as slightly lower benches and lower power points could mean the difference between the kitchen being readily accessible and easy for those in wheelchairs to use. Side-opening oven doors could significantly enhance safety.

Mobility and accessibility enablers
Handrails can make a huge difference when creating stability and reducing falls in the home. These are relatively inexpensive, provided the walls have suitable strength.

Ramps play a vital role in allowing people out of their home, whether in a wheelchair or using walking aids. Landscaping the garden to gradually slope up to the house could be a subtle and aesthetically pleasing alternative.



Independent Living Centre WA chief executive Gerri Clay shows how an iPad tablet device can be used to lower and raise a blind.



IF THE HOME MODIFICATIONS CAN KEEP A PERSON LIVING AT HOME FOR LONGER, THAT ALSO REDUCES COSTS.

Some of these measures may seem expensive but bear in mind safe living and quality of life is paramount. In some instances, financial assistance may be available.

Ms Clay said making appropriate home modifications could also be economically beneficial, particularly if they reduced the need for care.

"For instance, if the bathroom was set up in such a way that it facilitates independence, less help would be needed with toileting and showering, which in turn could reduce the cost of personal care," she said.

"And if the home modifications can keep a person living at home for longer, that also reduces costs associated with residential care."

Home Modifications Australia, an industry peak body representing home modification

service providers, builders, architects and occupational therapist members, urges people to think about such measures ahead of time.

Chief executive Michael Bleasdale said even if there was not an immediate need, planning ahead when renovating the home could prove beneficial in years to come.

"Most people wait until something bad like a fall happens before modifying their home, but given Australia's ageing population, it's wise to consider the likely eventual need ahead of time," he said.

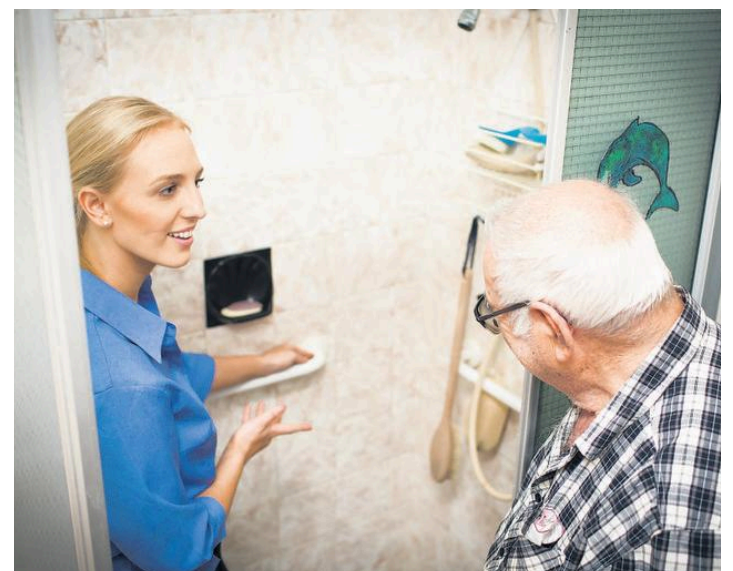
"If revamping the bathroom, consider access measures such as a level walk-in shower. There are plenty of attractive, stylish options available. It's far more cost-effective this way than making the changes later."



A pull-down wardrobe rail makes reaching for clothing items easier.



A side-opening oven removes a need to reach over the door.



ILC occupational therapist Kelly McAuliffe showcases a new grab rail in a shower to a client.

Don't put off those tweaks

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When areas of the home become a barrier to doing everyday activities comfortably and safely, it's time to look at how home modifications can help you to adapt and overcome these difficulties.

The Independent Living Centre in WA is a good first port of call, offering a free information advisory service from occupational therapists. You can also speak to private occupational therapists about helpful measures.

Unfortunately, many wait until a fall or accident before realising they need modifications, which could delay their return from the hospital to home. For these people, it is likely recommendations will be made as part of the treatment and recovery program.

You may be eligible to some financial assistance and ILC WA can help you determine your eligibility and help you navigate the pathway to access a service.

Some measures can be accessed via a public hospital, as long as you have been in hospital in the previous three months.

ILC WA chief executive Gerri Clay said there was assistance available through the MyAged Care national care program and Home and Community Care regional assessment services in WA. "If it was evident someone needed home mods, they would then be referred to one of the agencies that could offer these," she said. "The level of financial assistance available would depend upon individual needs and circumstances and is means tested."

Financial support is available to veterans but the level will depend on what type of Department of Veterans Affairs card is held.

Many people fund their own modifications, using recommendations from an OT. Be sure to choose a reputable tradesman. The not-for-profit Technology Assisting Disability WA will do minor home modifications for HACC-eligible clients, charging for materials only.

EXAMPLES OF TECHNOLOGIES/ PRODUCTS ON THE MARKET

- Side-opening ovens
- Higher kitchen cupboards that can be hydraulically lowered
- Kitchen benches that can be raised and lowered
- Blinds that open/close with the wave of a hand
- Remote-controlled opening/closing doors
- Automated and remote-controlled lighting
- Pull-down rails in wardrobes that bring the hanging clothes to shoulder height
- Voice-activated controls for opening doors and similar features
- Portable rails to use holiday accommodation when travelling
- Non-slip flooring (may be unsuitable for those with walking frames)