



Dear Pat: My husband and I are in our 50s. We want to build a house that we can stay in as we age. I remember how difficult it was for my mother to leave her house. Is universal design the answer for us? — Sara B.

Dear Sara: Leaving one's home, which you have lived in for many years, can be very difficult and emotionally painful. You can generally find someone to do the landscaping and cleaning. The reason most elderly people have to leave their homes is accessibility and mobility throughout the house.

Typical problem areas are stairs between floors or just a step or two from one room to another. Another common problem is reaching cabinets above a kitchen countertop. As you age, you shrink and lose the ability to stretch. A standard bathtub or even a shower stall with a raised edge can be difficult to enter or impossible if you are in a wheelchair.

Universal design likely is the answer for your new home. Although the elderly are commonly thought of as having problems in a traditional home, universal design considers everyone — adults, handicapped, children, etc. For example, a child often cannot access items in tall cabinets. A step at the edge of a shower can be a spot where anyone can stumble when he is less steady immediately after awaking in the morning.

Even if you do not end up staying in your home as you are planning, having a universal design makes your house attractive to a larger group of potential buyers. Older couples are often the best buyers because they have some savings and find it easier to get financing or may just pay cash outright. With proper initial design, the cost of building a universal home will not be significant higher.

The bathroom is a key area for universal design. At least one of the bathrooms should have a shower stall with no step to enter it and be large enough to accommodate a wheelchair. Install adequate grab-bars throughout the bathroom. Don't worry about its looking like a hospital. There are many fashionable grab-bars now made with attractive decorative finishes.

The kitchen is another area that should get particular universal design consideration. Standard-height countertops can be difficult to work on for someone who has reduced mobility or is in a wheelchair. To make your new home universal, consider installing countertops at two different heights, with a sink in each one.

Locating the cooktop and oven in an island can increase accessibility. Strong concrete countertops can be used with decorative wooden-edge trim. The trim can be heavy and designed to also function as a grab-bar. Also, consider the types of handles on the drawers so someone with severe arthritis can still open them.

Homes are typically designed with a window over the sink and cabinets high over the countertops. A better universal design would be lower cabinets above and behind the sink, with the windows above that reach to the ceiling. The same is true for cabinets above the rest of the countertops.

Also consider providing space for an elevator in two-story homes. These are small units about the size of an average-size closet. Until you need one installed, this area on both floors can be used as closets for storage.