Aging Lifestyles: No place like home â€¦ your own

by Joe_Volz

We've just had our kitchen faucet replaced. In the process, we asked the plumber what the difference was between a lever handle and two knobs. He hesitated then sheepishly mumbled, "I doubt if this fits you," he said, "but many people with arthritis find a lever much easier to operate."

Without knowing it, that plumber was practicing what's called "universal design."

The hottest trend in housing today is "universal design." Whether you are young or old, well or infirm, the "universal design" home fits all.

Such homes are ideal for homeowners who want to grow old in their own houses. An AARP survey reports that 90 percent of the 41 million elderly in this country said that staying put in their home is their preference. Yet often their abodes become user-unfriendly as they age. It gets tougher, for example, to climb stairs.

One reason the universal design concept is becoming more popular these days is because more baby boomers are becoming senior citizens. They are entering their sixties.

Once, they couldn't understand why their parents didn't want to leave home. Now, the boomers get it. They don't plan to move to "The Home" any more than their parents did.

So, the time has come to configure houses for those less able to navigate stairs, enter showers or operate appliances.

"Homes that have universal design features look like other homes. But they are much easier to use," AARP says on its Web site.

There are a variety of ways to convert to a universal home design.

Those with the financial means may buy a new home or condo built according to universal design principles. Yet it's quite possible to update more traditional homes and, contrary to what lots of people think, it doesn't cost a fortune. Many options exist to make homes more accommodating.

Some examples:

- Put a second hand rail opposite existing banisters on stairways and hallways.

- Electric chairs that ride on a rail, like a junior monorail, can be placed on stairs to ascend to a second floor. The price is not prohibitive.

- Replace traditional faucets and light switches with levers and rocker light switches. Arthritic hands can operate them but so can anyone carrying several bags of groceries.

- Put grab bars in bathroom showers and by toilets. That's a safety feature that benefits everyone of any age.

- Replace ordinary bulbs with brighter bulbs, especially those by reading chairs.

- Put lights at the top and bottom of stairways and over entryways and porches with on and off switches.

In other words, universal homes are just that - universal. They can help everyone.

What else can home owners - whether boomers or their parents - do to their homes?

Start by asking yourself what you hate to do most.

If it's hard to reach into your lower cabinet shelves, maybe you can find a way to adjust them or use them only for the items you never use anyway.

Perhaps, you carry too much at one time. Remind yourself of the safety issue the next time you can't easily see over whatever you are carrying.

Do you have throw rugs in your bathrooms or living spaces? Dump them, says the Home Safety Council. Or if you think that you can't live without them, make sure they have skid-resistant backing and use carpet tape to keep corners from curling.

RESOURCES

- "Universal Design for Homes," by Wendy A. Jordan, Quarry Books, February 2008.

- AARP is at 601 E Street NW, Washington, D.C.; 202-434-2277 (ask for the families department); or online at www.aarp.org/families/home_design/universaldesign.

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