

Getting real with real estate



In the market for a new home? Consider these accessibility features before you buy.

by Vicky Uhland

When New York-based developer Ken Regan began designing apartments for people with multiple sclerosis, he realized there were dozens of accessibility features he could include. But some of them would drive up the price of construction, which would, in turn, increase rents. So Regan worked with the National MS Society to form a focus group to find out which accessibility features people living with MS really want in their homes—and which they could do without.

Regan, who was diagnosed with MS in 2003, knows that symptoms vary and that people have different accessibility needs and budgets. But he learned there are certain baseline accessibility modifications that tend to be applicable for almost everyone. “It’s important to remember that your situation may change over time,” he says. “So if you choose a home with baseline accessibility, that can be helpful down the road.”

He’s seconded by San Francisco-based architect Peter Thaler, who was diagnosed with MS in 1985. Thaler, whose disease has transitioned to secondary progressive, remodeled his 1940s house to accommodate his mobility and vision issues. But he admits it was a long and costly process. Some of his clients have found it’s easier and less expensive to move to a home that already has accessibility features built in—which are becoming increasingly common as baby boomers age.

When it comes to deciding what those features should be, Thaler and Regan agree with Laura

Kingston, an occupational therapist with Providence St. Vincent Medical Center in Portland, Oregon, who says it's most important to focus on three key areas: the bathroom, the kitchen, and the entryways into the house and each room.

Here's what Kingston, Thaler and Regan believe are the must-have home accessibility features for people with MS—and which fall into the “nice-to-have” category.



A ramp such as this one can make the entrance to your home more accessible.

Entry points

If you have any type of mobility issue, the entrance to your home needs to be accessible. Ideally, a house should have a front door that's flush with the sidewalk leading up to it. But you can choose a home with front steps as long as there's a ramp. Thaler recommends a ribbed metal ramp that helps prevent slipping or sliding.

Unlocking and opening the front door can be a problem if you have dexterity, strength or vision issues. That's why Regan's focus group asked that remote-controlled automatic door openers be installed on their front doors. “You push a button on your key fob and it unlocks and opens the door,” he says. “You can do this from the outside when you're coming home, or from the couch if people are coming to visit you.”

Kingston says interior doorways should be a minimum of 32 inches wide to accommodate a standard-size wheelchair. But if you fall in love with a house that has narrower doorways, one low-cost solution she recommends is to simply take off the door and the jamb and put a

spring-rod with a curtain in its place. This gives you an extra 2 to 3 inches of access.

A truly accessible home should be on a single level. But if you're more at home in a two-story colonial than a one-story ranch, Thaler recommends looking for houses with stair lifts. He's installed two in his three-story home, making it easily accessible for his three-wheeled scooter. Make sure the lift has a warranty and has been installed by a reputable contractor.

Bathrooms

Regan says the first thing to look for is a shower you can roll into with a wheelchair. Even if you don't need that feature at this point, you may in the future. And adding it then will be pricey. "It can cost \$3,000 to \$8,000 to take out the existing tub and put in an accessible shower," he says. The roll-in shower should also have a wall-mounted seat—or at least room to add a freestanding bench.

Grab bars are a must in the shower. Kingston says to look for bars that are installed into the wall rather than mounted with suction cups, which can easily detach. It's also a good idea to have grab bars around the toilet. But if there's no wall nearby, Kingston says you can easily install safety frames that attach to the back of the toilet lid and wrap around the toilet like armrests. They're available at home improvement stores and can cost as little as \$30.

You'll also want an elevated toilet—sometimes referred to as a comfort or ADA toilet—to make transfers from a wheelchair, or from sitting to standing, easier and safer. Once again, if the home you fall in love with doesn't have these types of toilets, Kingston says you can add your own raised toilet seats. These seats, which sell for \$20 and up at home improvement stores, rest directly on the toilet bowl and elevate the seat 4 to 5 inches.

For the sink, look for pedestal models or others with under-sink access, which allow you to sit in front if you have mobility issues or fatigue. Regan says members of his focus group also asked for tilted mirrors at sink level so they could see themselves while sitting.

Kitchens

Countertops are traditionally 36 inches high, but Kingston says 32 inches is ideal if you're seated due to fatigue or mobility issues. While an accessible house doesn't need to have every countertop at this height, it's a good idea to look for homes that have at least one, with a cutout that's a minimum of 24 inches high and 30 inches wide for knee space.

Ideally, all lower cabinets should have slide-out shelves for easy access. And cupboards should be mounted 15 inches above the counter rather than the standard 18 inches. This allows a person using a wheelchair—or a mobile person with balance concerns—to reach the second shelf safely.

For appliances, Regan's focus group chose a side-by-side, counter-height refrigerator and freezer, with an in-door water and ice dispenser. They liked stoves with the controls on the front rather than the back, outfitted with tilted mirrors for a better cooktop view. Kingston

says another option is a stovetop with an opening underneath to accommodate knees, and a separate, wall-mounted oven.

Regan's focus group also asked for sinks with paddle-style handles mounted on the side rather than the back. This helps with dexterity and reaching issues. And Kingston warns that no matter how attractive a deep, farmhouse-style sink may be, don't be seduced. The ideal sink is shallow, with the drain at the back, and a curtain rather than cabinet doors in front. This allows you to comfortably sit while using the sink.

Other parts of the house

Regan's focus group asked for hardwood or tile floors in the living room, bedroom, bathrooms and kitchen for easier accessibility. "If you buy a house with carpet, you're just going to tear it up with a wheelchair or walker," he says. Thaler also recommends looking for non-skid flooring like honed granite or textured tile in wet areas.

Regan's focus group liked horizontal sliding windows, which are easier to open than vertical windows. But while you may enjoy the occasional gust of fresh air, Kingston says air conditioning is a must for people with MS-related heat sensitivity. Central air conditioning is easier to manage than individual window units.

Thaler stresses the importance of garages that are big enough to allow you to roll a wheelchair or scooter up to an open car door. And if a home has a long hallway, he recommends it include a railing. "It's helpful if you have trouble walking, and it also turns the hallway into a great exercise space."

Lighting is an important consideration as well. Thaler likes homes with plenty of overhead lighting, especially if you have vision issues. "Ideally, you want LED lights, which are longer-lasting than other lights," so they require changing less frequently, he says.

Regan's focus group also stressed the importance of light switches and thermostats positioned at an accessible height, along with additional electrical outlets in the master bedroom to accommodate medical equipment.

Finally, "choose a home that's comfortable and pleasing to the senses, with colors you find soothing," Thaler says. "The more uplifting your environment is, the more positive your attitude will be." And the happier you'll be to live there for a long time to come.

Vicky Uhland is a freelance writer and editor in Lafayette, Colorado.

For more information on purchasing an accessible home, visit [Affordable Accessible Housing](#).

Read more about [Ken Regan's housing communities for people with MS](#).