

## Habitat » Design

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### Sunset Design

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Plan early for a home that works for the elderly

*When parents are in the winter of their lives, children suddenly realise that most parts of the house are not elderly friendly. A few small alterations can make your home a haven for the elderly.*

Take the normal scenario in most households: aged parents, a son and his family, and maybe a yet-to-be-married brother and sister. They live in a family house, built by the parents when they were young, with interiors that are ideally suited for a normal, active life.

Today, the parents are in the winter of their lives, and the children suddenly realise that most parts of the house are not elderly friendly. Says Arun Gupta, CEO, Age Ventures India, and geriatric expert, “Traditional lifestyles and joint family systems have, to a large extent, helped us to look after the elderly. But as times change, we have to plan for the future care of our elders, as they grow older and we ourselves move on in age.”

How can you make an existing home elderly friendly? Says Vidya Subramaniam, who owns Vaigai Sanitation, “I notice that when families plan a new house or apartment, considerable importance is given to the children's room, kitchen and bathrooms, but elderly-friendly features and facilities are given the least priority. I advise my customers that they should give due importance to this aspect as well.” With age, come creaking joints, aches and pains, and sometimes special needs. It does not take much to plan or modify our living spaces in a way that they become more comfortable and enjoyable.

Chennai housewife E. Nair visits her 97-year-old adopted mother in Bangalore every month for a week. Says Nair, “For that age, she is still quite active but slow in her movements. For her own safety and to give her a sense of independency, I have advised her to use a walker and we have installed non-skid tiles all over the house and railings on most walls.” Even more important, even though she does not use a wheelchair, the family has widened all the doors and removed most obstacles to ensure smooth access.

Confirms Ashok Iyer, vice-president (residential business) Shriram Properties, “It's necessary to have larger rooms with sufficient space for movement. Bathrooms should be at least 10 ft by 10 ft.” There are smaller things you can do, such as have balconies filled with greenery and cemented or tiled pathways in gardens.

In most homes, bathrooms are the place where frailties are highlighted. This is also because people want to retain independence and privacy in the toilet for as long as it is physically possible. And this is an enclosed space with wet and slippery floors. So, bathrooms need special attention when it comes to making them elderly friendly. Hand showers, grab bars, and anti-skid flooring are important, as are shower partitions to keep the other areas dry.

Flooring is important. It's best to use matt or satin finish tiles that offer better grip than polished surfaces. Says Subramaniam, "Joint-free flooring may be the rage but spaces between tiles filled with modern epoxy fillers looks good and makes floors safer."

According to architect Siddarth Shankar, some key aspects should be addressed when designing houses for the elderly. "Avoid split levels in the house. And equip at least one bathroom with grab rails, shower stools, and hand showers." Toilets locks should be such that they can be opened from the outside, and emergency call bells can be installed near the bed and in toilets. Nair recommends other modifications such as railings on the side of beds and dining chairs with arms. "Sliding doors not only take up less space but are easy to operate too," she says. The other aspect that most of us forget is to adjust shelves and switches to accessible heights, especially for parents or grandparents who are wheelchair bound.

These need not be very expensive — a grab rail costs around Rs. 7,500; a door lock with lever handle is about Rs. 1,500; and anti-skid tiles come for Rs. 40 per sq. ft. Of course, it is always cheaper to build in elder-friendly features right from the beginning rather than retro-fit later. But if you haven't, a make-over and new fittings aren't that challenging, as any interior designer will tell you.

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