

STAIRLIFTS AND HOMELIFTS

An Information Booklet



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www.arc.org.uk

Committed to curing arthritis

STAIRLIFTS AND HOMELIFTS

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Introduction

You may love your home, but now find that the stairs are a real hazard. How do you solve the problem? This booklet tries to help you make the correct choice for your circumstances. Usually your options are:

- to change the way you use your present home
- to move to more suitable accommodation – perhaps a bungalow or ground-floor flat, or a house that can be more easily adapted than your present home
- to introduce adaptations to your home, such as installing a stairlift, to make it safer and more comfortable.

The booklet stresses both the need for professional advice before you make a decision, and the need to enquire about any available grants for equipment or conversions before any work is started. It includes useful addresses to help you do this. In most areas informed advice is available from community occupational therapists (OTs), who are usually based in the Department of Social Services of the local council (see the section ‘Who to ask’).



Figure 1. Seek good advice.

Changing the way you use your home

Installing a **ground-floor toilet** will eliminate the need to go up and down the stairs during the day. In addition, the conversion of a **downstairs room for use as a bedroom** may be possible depending on the layout of your house. You need to consider the pros and cons. If you have to spend a lot of time during the day in bed then it may be an advantage to be downstairs. But decide if you would be happy sleeping downstairs at night as well. Of course, the size and layout of some homes will make it difficult or impossible to make either of these changes.

Moving home

For some people moving home is a solution. Accommodation on one level, such as a bungalow or ground-floor flat, might be better for you, if you are otherwise happy to make a move. You might consider finding a house more suitable for adaptation to your needs. In this case grants for conversion may be available. However, it is worth remembering that local authorities have to take into account just how suitable a home is for a person with mobility problems before they can give a grant. For example, you might not get a grant if the house you chose were situated up a steep bank with a lot of outside steps. Your local council will advise on this.

Stairlifts and homelifts

Let us assume that you have decided that you need some sort of lift.

Try before you buy

Each person's requirements are different. You should therefore try out a stairlift or through-floor lift (also

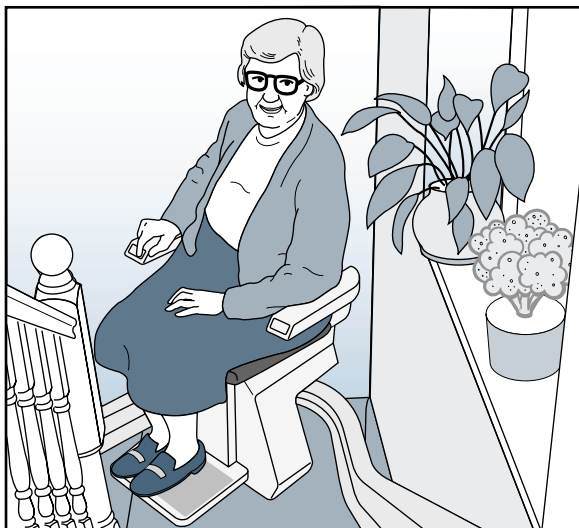


Figure 2. Try before you buy.

known as a homelift) before you spend any money. You can do this either at a Disabled Living Centre or in someone's home.

Disabled Living Centres

There are over 40 Disabled Living Centres (or Independent Living Centres) in the UK. You can find the ones nearest to you by contacting the Disabled Living Centres Council (see 'Useful addresses'). Most of these centres have a range of stairlifts for you to try. They have well-informed and helpful staff, many of whom are occupational therapists or physiotherapists, who can give impartial advice. If possible go with someone who can help advise you.

It is worth remembering that a centre will probably have more space on their stairs than you have at home. Any stairlift you acquire will need to fit in with the dimensions and shape of your stairs. Also, the user of a stairlift has to keep pressing on the drive button for the whole trip. Your own stairs will probably be longer than the short

demonstration flights in centres, and this is important if your particular condition means you have difficulty keeping up a sustained pressure with one finger.

Home demonstration

Disabled Living Centres are the best place to see a range of lifts, but if you want to know what a stairlift or through-floor lift is like in the home it may be possible for a lift company representative to arrange a visit to someone else's home. If you are thinking of getting a **through-floor lift** we especially recommend seeing one in place, because it is otherwise difficult to imagine what it would be like in your home.

Choosing a stairlift

Thorough assessments of both the layout of your home and your own physical problems are needed if you are to choose the best stairlift for you. Here are some of the main points you should consider.

Unusual stairs

Is your stairway straight or curved? Several types of stairlift are available for stairs that curve either at the top or at the bottom.

A swivel seat?

You would normally get off a stairlift at the top by turning yourself on the seat so that you are facing away from the stairs. Swivel seats are designed to make this manoeuvre safer. They work like an office chair and swivel at the top of the stairs so you end up facing the landing. These seats also have armrests for you to grip on, making it easier to get out of. Swivel seats have a control, allowing the chair to swivel when you want it to; some people with hand, arm or wrist problems find these difficult to deal with, so the 'try before you buy' rule applies.



Figure 3. Swivel seat

Doorway problems

If a door or passage at the very top or bottom of the stairs could be blocked by the track of the stairlift, there are a number of models designed to overcome this problem. Remember, however, that if you choose a model whose track stops short of the top of the stairs, the lift will also stop short of the top. This might make getting off dangerous. A folding track is available for the bottom to give access to a doorway, but you will need to make sure that you are able to fold and unfold it.

Folding and unfolding the chair

Some stairlifts obstruct easy passage for those climbing the stairs. In these cases the footplate, seat and armrests

need to be folded out of the way. The stairlift company representative should be able to tell you how much room the stairlift takes up. If you want to be able to fold the footplate yourself, check that you can do so safely and easily, as you may have to do it several times a day. Folding and unfolding the footplate can be tricky or even dangerous, especially at the top of the stairs.

Your physical problems

As mentioned before, **hand or wrist problems** can make it difficult to keep the drive button pressed for the whole trip. If you do have hand or wrist problems a joystick mechanism will probably be easier for you to operate. Check that you can easily use both this and any lever that allows the seat to swivel. Your hand and wrist should also be able to cope with any armrests and seats that need folding out of the way.

If you have any **hip, knee and back problems** the height of the stairlift seat is important. Check that it is right for you at both top and bottom of the stairs. Some people with painful hips and knees find a swivel seat with fixed armrests easier to use, so they have the chair arms to push up from. If you are unable to sit upright because of hip, knee or back problems, check that your knees or feet will not get caught against the opposite wall or banisters. This could be dangerous. Curved-rail lifts have to 'cut the corner' on bends, with the result that some users' knees brush against the staircase post.

Using a wheelchair

If you use a wheelchair to get around the house you need to look at the lift options slightly differently. You might want to look at a conventional stairlift, a wheelchair platform stairlift or perhaps a through-floor lift.

Conventional stairlift

You need to ask yourself these questions. How will you get out of your wheelchair and onto the stairlift? Is there sufficient room at top and bottom of the stairs to get the wheelchair close enough to the stairlift? This will depend on how you get on and off – whether you are able to stand and maybe take a step before getting on. Will you need one wheelchair upstairs and another downstairs? If you need help transferring from wheelchair to lift is there enough space for helper, wheelchair and you? Discuss these issues with your family or others who can advise you and the stairlift company representative.

Wheelchair platform stairlift

There are models of stairlift specifically designed to take a wheelchair. A sunken area may need to be constructed at the bottom of the stairs to take the platform and provide level access for the wheelchair. This has many advantages for anyone who would find it difficult to move from a wheelchair onto a stairlift seat. You will need to make sure there is enough space top and bottom, not just for the platform but also turning room for the wheelchair so that you can easily manoeuvre the chair on and off. You also need to consider whether others in the house will be inconvenienced by the platform.

Through-floor lift

If there is not enough room at the top or bottom of the stairs for either a stairlift or a wheelchair platform, a through-floor lift is the best solution. This can be placed in a living room or hall and go up through the ceiling to landing or bedroom.

Once again, get professional advice and try before you decide to buy.



Figure 4. Through-floor lift

Walking aids

If you use a stick or walking frame ('Zimmer') to get around the house you may be tempted to take it with you on the stairlift. Don't! It might catch on the steps or banisters while the lift is moving. Ask for another walking aid so you can have one at the top of the stairs and one below. A handrail near the stairlift may be useful if you feel unsteady on your feet – your local Department of Social Services may be able to provide this.

Other people in the house

Using a lift with a helper

You may need a helper to use a lift. After a few tries most lift users and their helpers develop a smooth, trouble-free routine for using a lift. One thing to note is that at some point the helper will need to get past a stairlift so s/he will be in a position to help you off at the other end. It is usually better for the helper to get past at the bottom of the stairs, in case of a fall.

The rest of the family

Families quickly get used to lifts and almost forget they are there at all. But there are a few points to consider.

Stairlifts run on a track, which cuts down the amount of space for other people climbing the stairs, especially where they go round a corner and the treads go narrower at one end. The track may also protrude at the bottom of the stairs and the seat or footplate may be a hazard. However, a moving stairlift will stop immediately if it encounters any object or person on the stairs.

Through-floor lifts and wheelchair platform stairlifts have safety devices, which prevent anyone from being crushed by the descending platform. Children above toddler age quickly get used to lifts and keep away from

them, although if you anticipate trouble there are models which can be turned off with a key. Safety devices on all lifts prevent children from being trapped by a moving lift and moving parts are protected from fingers by guards. The main problem with toddlers is that the tracks of many lifts have oily parts, which can result in greasy fingers. Unfortunately, the positioning of the track usually means you cannot put a safety gate at the bottom of the stairs.

The costs of lifts

Purchase

Lifts are expensive, but if you really need one financial help should be available. This will vary according to where you live and whether you own your property or are renting. Grants may be subject to a means test – however, most retired or disabled people will find they only have a small amount to contribute. It is always worth applying.

Running costs

Lifts rarely cost more than £1.00 a week in electricity. Maintenance can be more expensive and varies sharply from make to make. Check the maintenance costs. Some council or housing association tenants do not have to pay the cost of maintenance.

Lift no longer required

It is usually quite easy to have lifts removed when they are no longer needed. If you live in a council or housing association property you should be able to get help to do this. In practice the only lifts that can easily be resold are stairlifts with a straight track, because curved rail stairlifts will not usually fit anywhere else. Seek advice from your manufacturer, the local Department of Social Services or your local Disabled Living Centre.

Breakdowns and safety

It is extremely rare for lifts to stop working in the middle of a journey. If there are problems it is usually with starting. If you feel you need security, monitoring alarms are available. These have a small press-button transmitter, which will contact an emergency-monitoring centre. Some people use a cordless phone or mobile phone which they carry when on the lift. If you live on your own we recommend putting a phone extension on the upper floor, just in case the lift isn't working when you come to use it. It may reassure you to know that the safety record of stairlifts and homelifts is good; there are few breakdowns, and accidents are extremely rare.

Who to ask

Advice is freely available from your local Department of Social Services. The address or phone number will be listed in the phone book under the name of the local council, usually under the sub-heading 'Social Services'. Either contact your nearest office of the Department or phone the local authority to find out which is your office. Alternatively a local library should be able to give you the number or address. Disabled Living Centres give independent advice free of charge on all aspects of assistance, adaptations, financial help and so on. You usually need to make an appointment to visit. As mentioned, the Disabled Living Centres Council can give you the details of the centre nearest to you.

Useful addresses

The Arthritis Research Campaign (arc)

PO Box 177, Chesterfield
Derbyshire S41 7TQ
Phone: 0870 850 5000
www.arc.org.uk

As well as funding research, we produce a range of free information booklets and leaflets. Please contact the address above for a list of titles.

Arthritis Care

18 Stephenson Way
London NW1 2HD
Phone: 020 7380 6500
Helplines: 020 7380 6555 (10am–4pm Mon–Fri)
Or freephone: 0808 800 4050 (12pm–4pm Mon–Fri)
www.arthritiscare.org.uk

Offers self-help support, a helpline service (on both numbers above), and a range of leaflets on arthritis.

Disabled Living Centres Council (DLCC)

Redbank House
4 St Chad's Street, Cheetham
Manchester M8 8QA
Phone: 0870 770 2866
www.dlcc.org.uk

Contact the DLCC for details of your nearest Disabled Living Centre(s). A full list of addresses is available on the DLCC website.

Disabled Living Foundation (DLF)

380–384 Harrow Road
London W9 2HU
Phone: 020 7289 6111
Helpline: 0845 130 9177 (10am–4pm Mon–Fri)
www.dlf.org.uk

Offers advice and information on equipment to help you in daily activities.

nras (National Rheumatoid Arthritis Society)

Unit B4 Westacott Business Centre

Westacott Way, Littlewick Green

Maidenhead SL6 3RT

Phone: 01628 823524

Helpline: 0845 458 3969

www.rheumatoid.org.uk

A national charity which focuses specifically on rheumatoid arthritis.

RADAR (Royal Association for Disability & Rehabilitation)

12 City Forum, 250 City Road

London EC1V 8AF

Phone: 020 7250 3222

www.radar.org.uk

Arthritis Research Campaign



The Arthritis Research Campaign (**arc**) is the only major UK charity funding research in universities, hospitals and medical schools to investigate the cause and cure of arthritis and other rheumatic diseases. We also produce a comprehensive range of over 80 free information booklets and leaflets covering different types of arthritis and offering practical advice to help in everyday life.

arc receives no government or NHS grants and relies entirely on its own fundraising efforts and the generosity of the public to support its research and education programmes.

Arthritis Today is the quarterly magazine of **arc**. This will keep you informed of the latest treatments and self-help techniques, with articles on research, human interest stories and fundraising news. If you would like to find out how you can receive this magazine regularly, please write to: Arthritis Research Campaign, Ref AT, PO Box 177, Chesterfield S41 7TQ.

A team of people contributed to this booklet. The original text was written by allied health professionals with expertise in the subject. It was assessed at draft stage by doctors, allied health professionals, an education specialist and people with arthritis. A non-medical editor rewrote the text to make it easy to understand and an **arc** medical editor is responsible for the content overall.



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