

# Ramps and lifts

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**H**ave you ever limited your activities because climbing the stairs seemed “too much” or you just didn’t feel safe? Sometimes design features such as a sunk-in living room or a split level home create obstacles to day-to-day living. With a little planning and investment these obstacles can be overcome, so they do not interfere with your activities.

## Improving stairway safety

Stairs, both inside and outside the home, can easily become a barrier or even hazardous. To improve the safety of your stairs, keep them clutter free, and outside, free from snow and ice. Sturdy hand rails, preferably on both sides of the stairs, need to be installed. Consider the addition of easy to attach non-slip treads, and increasing the colour contrast of the steps.

For example, outdoor reflective yellow paint can be painted on the top edge of each riser, increasing the visibility of the step.

Ensuring your stairs are in good condition, making them level, stable and sturdy, is critical to ensuring ongoing safety. Stairs that are not in good repair can lead to instability and falls. If you are unable to repair the stairs on your own, some communities have special services for seniors who may need small repairs. Hiring a handyman or general contractor to complete the repairs is another option.

## Stair lift

If it is difficult to climb or descend the stairs, a stair lift can be installed inside the home. A track or rail is put onto the stair well. A chair is



Photo: Bruno

mounted on this track system. Through the push of a button this chair will ascend or descend the stairs. When considering this type of system, ensure that there is enough space at the top and bottom of the stairs to enable a safe transfer. The person using this system needs to have good sitting balance, so as not to lose their posture during the movement up or down the stairs. If the person uses a mobility device, it would need to be carried up separately, unless a second one is available on the other level.

## Thresholds

Thresholds, particularly from the outside to the inside of the home can be very uneven. This can cause a trip and fall hazard for people able to walk, and a barrier for those who use a mobility device. A threshold ramp will help to reduce the suddenness of this transition and make it easier for the person using a wheelchair to get through the door.

## Ramps

Where stairs make access to the home or a particular room difficult, a ramp may be an option. Each region or municipality has regulations as to the design of ramps which may include the slope, length before a landing, size of the landing, location of hand rails, total rise and whether or not it needs to be a permanent structure. As a general rule, one foot of distance is required for every inch of rise. If the ramp is any steeper it likely will not meet local regulations, and be too steep to safely manoeuvre. Before building or purchasing a ramp, consult with a knowledgeable professional to make sure that the ramp

### Quick tip

Keep your stairs clutter free!

- Keep decorative pots and plants off the staircase
- Keep shoes and gear in a closet or basket, not near or on the stairs
- During the holidays, make sure the bannister is accessible and free of festive decor.

will be safe, meet your needs, and comply with any regulations.

When walking, ramps may be more difficult to traverse than stairs and may increase falls. Providing an option with both stairs and a ramp is one way to address this issue. If it is difficult to push a wheelchair up the ramp, grade-aids can be purchased for some wheelchairs.

This device allows the wheelchair to be pushed forward, but will not allow it to roll back. If you are pushing someone in the wheelchair, remember that controlling the descent down the ramp can be more difficult than pushing the chair up the ramp. A non-skid surface on the ramp will help to prevent slips and falls.

Temporary and more permanent ramps are available. When choosing a ramp make sure it is long enough so that the resulting slope isn't too high, and that the weight capacity will support both the weight of

the individual, their chair, and a caregiver as appropriate. Ramp options include:

**Suitcase ramp:** This temporary ramp folds both longitudinally and width wise to make it easier to move and transport. This type of ramp comes in a variety of lengths, but it is important to recognize that the longer the length, the heavier and more cumbersome the ramp is to use.



Photo: Handicare

**Rolling ramp:** Another option is a ramp that rolls up, rather than folds. This may be a little less awkward, but can still be difficult to manoeuvre.

**Modular Ramp System:** As an installed system, this ramp configuration can be customized to meet accessibility needs. Hand rails and landings are also available to ensure that the system can be configured to meet local regulations.

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### Quick tip

Most stair lifts offer foldable seats that save space when the unit is not in use. If others use your stairs, it's a good idea to get in the habit of folding the seat after each use.

