

Universal Design Tips for the Kitchen

Courtesy of Center for Real Life Kitchen Design at Virginia Tech

Installing a drawer dishwasher or raising a standard dishwasher off the floor reduces back strain for all users.



Hear from designers across the country about how to use universal design to make your kitchen both accessible and stylish:

“We designed a kitchen for a couple where the husband is in a wheelchair but the wife is not. We put the wall cabinets at 15 inches off the counter instead of 18 so he could retrieve items off the first shelf.

“We lowered the second sink and the cooktop but kept the main sink and dishwasher at standard height. We used double ovens with doors that swing out and placed them a little lower so that the lower oven is within his reach. Rather than building the microwave into the cabinetry, we placed it on the countertop. The refrigerator/freezer was a top-bottom model with the freezer on the bottom.

“It’s really on the island where all his special needs are met. There’s a 30-inch-high cooktop and a 30-inch-high prep sink with an open space underneath. A raised 42-inch-high bar seating area at the island made a convenient splash area for the cooktop.” — **Vicki Edwards, CKD, ASID, Owner, Designer, Kitchen & Bath Images, Brentwood, TN**

“A desk for one person can serve as a food preparation area for a shorter person. One client had poor vision as a result of complications from diabetes and lighting was a high priority. We used can lights, undercabinet lights for task lighting, and dimmers.

“If a client is in a wheelchair or has a short stature, the surfaces need to be lower. In general, a lower surface is better for prep work and for rolling dough because you can get better leverage. Some materials work better for everyone, such as a smoother countertop surface instead of tile. A smoother surface makes it easier to move items across the counter and clean up.

“People are aware of what’s not working for them. They’re looking to be able to easily access things with the least amount of movement using such accessories as rollout shelves and lazy Susans in the corners. All those goodies that we use in universal design can benefit kids, those in wheelchairs, the elderly, those with balance problems—everyone.”—**Marge Ling, CKD, CBD, Designer, Custom Kitchen Bath Center, Fremont, CA**

“If the client is 7-foot-tall and has trouble bending over, then we can increase the height of the base cabinets. If a client is in a wheelchair, we can heighten the toe spaces or do wall-mounted cabinets and leave areas open under sinks and cooktops. It becomes more of a challenge to incorporate an Old World style into a kitchen for wheelchair access

because the Old World style has decorative toekick areas, while an open toekick might lend itself to something more modern.

"There are faucets approved by the ADA that have larger controls and that don't have to be manipulated by fingers, but can be pushed and pulled with a closed fist. On cabinets, larger pulls and knobs similarly make for easier operation. An elevated dishwasher eases loading and unloading.

"To help with vision impairment, you could do more contrasting light and dark colors: light cabinets with darker pulls and white cabinet interiors to make items stand out.

"The cost can be higher for custom universal design solutions, or you can simply incorporate standard cabinets in creative ways at desk height and vanity height."—**Scott Perry, Designer, The Kitchen Wright, Carmel, IN**

"You can adjust the toe kick height and open areas under cabinets and sinks so that there is room for wheelchairs. You can also bring wall cabinets lower to the ground and set base cabinets at desk height. Many cabinet companies can do custom universal design. You'll have a lot more options for door styles with a custom cabinet manufacturer.

"The design should cater to the needs of whoever will be using the kitchen. If the chef has a bad back then he'll need more at higher levels, rollout shelves to get to the back of base cabinets, and decreased wall cabinet heights so he doesn't have to use stools