



Choosing equipment to get up and down stairs

DLF Factsheet

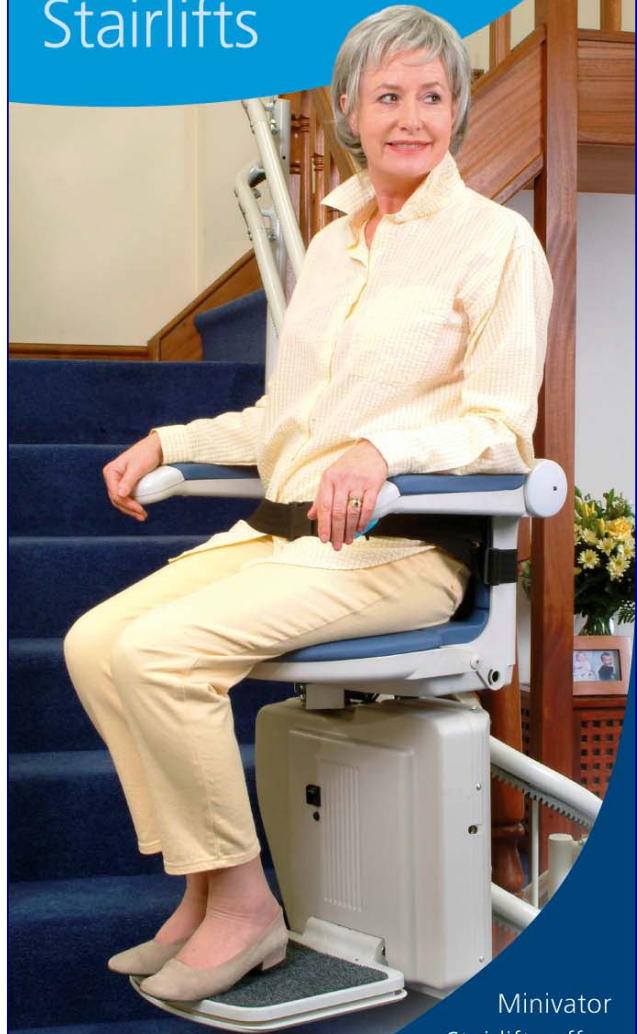
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Lifting Expectations

Minivator

Straight & Curved Stairlifts



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INTRODUCTION

Once it has become difficult or impossible for someone to get up and down the stairs, they face a choice of options: living downstairs, moving to a bungalow or ground floor flat or installing a domestic lift. The first option may not be practical because, although it is easy to move a bed downstairs, providing bathroom facilities can prove difficult and costly and downstairs living space will be reduced. The second option is not only costly but may result in the loss of good friends and neighbours. Installing a domestic lift is often the most practical and economical option.

The aim of this factsheet is to provide first stop information on equipment to assist someone getting up and down stairs, and details about the useful features of different types of lift.

WHERE TO GET HELP AND ADVICE

Everyone, including a carer, has the right to ask social services for a community care assessment. The council assessor will consider the type and level of need and suggest a range of solutions that may include provision of equipment or adaptations.

Since April 2003 people have had the right and choice to ask for a direct payment of money instead of the community care service offered. This includes the right to ask for money

towards payment for alternative equipment if this is preferred to the equipment offered by the council.

For up-to-date product and supplier information, please contact our equipment helpline, open Monday to Friday from 10am to 4 pm. tel: 0845 130 9177 (calls charged at local rate), or textphone: 020 7432 8009.

Alternatively you can write to our letter enquiry service or contact us via email at advice@dlf.org.uk. To help us give you a concise and informative reply, please provide us with as much detail as possible including information on the difficulties you are having and any solutions you have considered, including equipment ideas.

SUPPLY, PROVISION AND SOURCES OF FUNDING

PROVISION

Disabled facilities grants (DFGs)

Alterations (adaptations) to your home to provide access to essential areas, such as bathroom/toilet, are the legal responsibility of the local authority and are funded through Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs). These could cover stairlifts, through-floor lifts or provision of a toilet on the ground floor. You may be expected to pay towards the cost. Your contribution is assessed through a means test, and the grant awarded ranges from 0-100% of the cost up to a limit of £25,000. DFGs are available to owners and tenants in both private and rented housing.

An occupational therapist from the social services department will assess the necessity and practicality of any adaptation before the grant is awarded.

People living in Scotland should contact their local authority as the law there is different.

PRIVATE PURCHASE OF EQUIPMENT

Before making any decisions about buying equipment, or making alterations, it is advisable to contact a community OT, based at your local social services/social work department, who will advise on your requirements and suggest possible solutions. He/she should also give you information about DFGs and may arrange for a company representative to come and talk over possibilities.

If you decide to buy equipment privately, then advice on design and access issues is available from the Centre for Accessible Environments (see useful addresses). This organisation also maintains a database of architects and surveyors with experience of design for disability.

If you decide to buy equipment privately, it is advisable to try them out first. Arrange a visit to one of the disabled living centres, which will have a range of equipment on display, and from where you will be able to get advice and information on what may be most

suitable for you. For details of your nearest centre contact the Disabled Living Centres Council (see useful addresses).

SECOND HAND STAIRLIFTS

It is possible to save some money by buying a second hand lift. It is advisable to purchase from a lift manufacturer, or an authorised company dealing in re-conditioned lifts who will have checked that the lift meets current safety standards, and will provide a guarantee.

The tracking for straight stairlifts can usually be re-sited. Most makes, if required, can be installed on the opposite side of the stairs to the original sitting - although different makes and models require differing amounts of work. The approximate cost is £1,000 - £12,000.

The track of a second hand curved stairlift cannot be re-sited in another house. However, with some makes, a new track can be made to fit your house and the second hand seat unit and motor can be used in conjunction with it. There is a limited saving on the cost of a new unit – approximately £200 - £300.. Be wary of curved tracking that is offered second hand as this is not good practice.

If you are considering buying a lift privately, e.g. via the local paper or adverts board, it is advisable to get the original stairlift manufacturer, or company dealing in re-conditioned stairlifts to assess the stairlift for its suitability for your use in the new location, service it and, if all is satisfactory,

actually carry out the installation. You should not attempt to wire up and install it yourself. Always check that the manufacturer is still in business and/or parts are still available should anything go wrong.

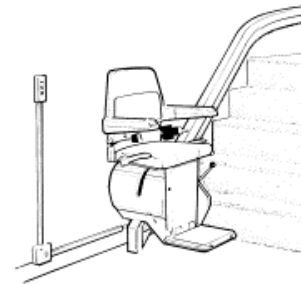
Make sure that the track will be long enough to fit your stairs; a track that covers 14 stairs in one house might only cover 13 in another. The length is the important factor - as an approximate guide, the length required is the length of the face of the stairs from the top nosing to the hall floor plus 14 inches.

Once the stairlift has been installed, it is advisable to set up a service/maintenance contract with a company who you will be able to call on 24 hours a day if mechanical difficulties arise. Annual maintenance is recommended.

TYPES OF STAIRLIFT



Stairlifts are powered lifts mounted on stair-fixed tracks which follow the line of the stairs. The track can usually be sited on either side of the stairs. Both curved and straight tracks are available, although straight tracks are much cheaper than curved ones.



Stairlifts are often cheaper to install than through floor lifts as building alterations are not normally required. Curved stairlifts cost approximately twice as much as straight stairlifts.

Stairlifts can usually be installed in a day and when necessary, can be removed leaving little trace.

SEATED STAIRLIFTS



These tend to be the most common type used in a domestic setting. The majority of users are able to walk, but find it difficult to negotiate the stairs. The person must be able to sit safely on the seat during transit and transfer on and off at the top and bottom of the stairs. A swivel seat and lift-up armrests will make transfers onto and off the seat easier. The swivel seat can be manually or electrically operated.

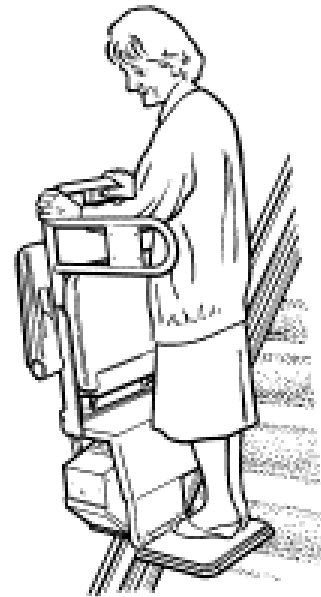
Check that you are able to manipulate the controls for both the footrest and the swivel seat.

It is preferable that the user can transfer independently; however, in some situations it may be possible for the carer to carry out an assisted transfer in conjunction with a piece of small handling equipment. The ability of the carer to transfer the user at the top of the stairs should be very carefully considered and avoided if at all possible.

It may also be very difficult to pass the person seated on the stairlift to give him/her assistance at both the top and bottom of the stairs.

Walking sticks may be carried on the stairlift but, if the person uses a larger walking aid, it probably cannot be carried on the stairlift and therefore two aids will be required - one at the bottom and one at the top of the stairs.

STANDING STAIRLIFTS



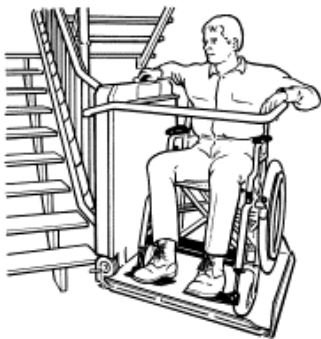
These can be used by people who are able both to walk and to stand while travelling up and down stairs. These may be chosen in preference to seated models if the staircase is exceptionally narrow or if the person has a stiff leg and is unable to bend his knee when seated. These stairlifts usually have one or two guard rails that the user can hold onto during transit.

PERCHING STAIRLIFTS



Perching stairlifts are very similar to standing stairlifts except that they provide a small amount of additional support underneath the buttocks. Therefore, the user is transported in a perching position, i.e. between sitting and standing. These stairlifts usually have one or two guard rails that the user can hold onto during transit.

STAIRLIFTS WITH A WHEELCHAIR PLATFORM



These may enable the person to retain his independence and eliminate the need to transfer out of his wheelchair and onto a stairlift. Instead the user is able to wheel or be pushed straight onto the platform.

Although most of the platforms fold up against the wall when they are not in use, this type of stairlift takes up a lot of room on the stairs and many domestic stairs may not be wide enough to accommodate it.

CONSIDERATIONS WHEN CHOOSING A STAIRLIFT

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

Before deciding on the most suitable form of lift consider the following:

- someone with a disability who has a condition that could deteriorate should consider what the best long term solution will be. Although he/she may be able to use a seated stairlift now, it may be wise to consider installing a through-floor lift so that in future the option to travel in a wheelchair is available;
- is the user able to bend his/her knees sufficiently to travel in a seated position?
- does the lift need to be operated by the user, his carer or both? Controls are available to allow users and carers to operate the lift but it will be easier to have these fitted during the initial installation;
- the environment (e.g. doors or thresholds near the staircase, bulkheads or banister rails, radiators near the staircase);
- other users of the stairs, e.g. children, pets, elderly visitors;
- it is advisable that the stairlift covers the whole staircase (e.g. curved stairlift or straight lift with platform). Some people will attempt to save costs by installing a straight stairlift on a curved staircase and attempt to manage the first or last few steps. However, if their condition deteriorates, they will no longer be able to manage this.

TRAVELLING POSITION

- Will the user want to stand, sit on a seat or use his/her wheelchair?
- Will the standard seat provided be the correct size for the user ?
- Will the user need a special seat for a child or a harness for a more severely disabled child? A seat unit or moulded seating system will have to be removed before the seat can be folded.
- Which direction will the user need to face? Most seats face sideways, but if the user has a stiff knee he/she may need to face forwards to give them more room.

DIMENSIONS AND HOUSE DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS



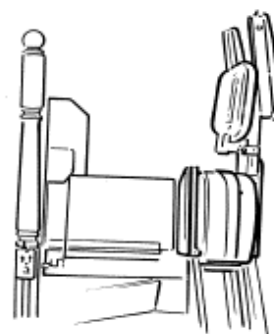
If your staircase has a sub-landing at the top, with a few steps to the left or right, most companies can fit a manual or

motorised folding platform which bridges the gap between the top of the stairlift and the landing, although the number of stairs and the amount of available headroom will need to be taken into consideration. This allows the user to get off the stairlift and walk straight onto the landing, avoiding the need to have a curved or two straight stairlifts installed. Some people may find the platforms unnerving as they are quite high up over the staircase.

If a standing stairlift is preferred, is there sufficient headroom?

If the track for the stairlift cannot continue beyond the bottom or top step of the staircase, usually because it will obstruct a door, some companies can provide a fold-up, hinged rail to overcome this problem. This rail may be manually or electrically operated.

Can other members of the household easily use the stairway when the lift is folded against the wall?



CONTROLS

Will the user be able to operate the standard controls, usually push button controls sited on the end of the armrest, or is an alternative method required, for example joystick or toggle controls?

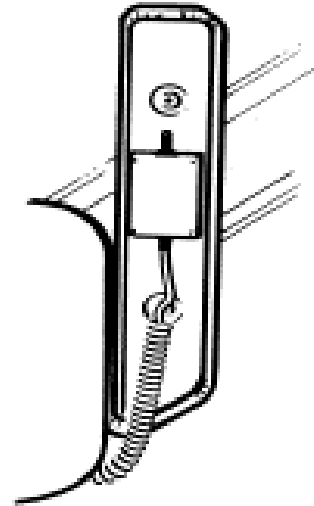


Will the controls need to be sited in another position?

Wander leads allow the user to operate the controls from the most comfortable position or a carer to operate the lift independently.



Remote controls, for a carer to operate, are also available from some companies.



Lifts are available with an audible signal to alert blind and partially sighted users that the lift is at the top or the bottom of the track.

POWER SOURCE

Straight stairlifts are available with a battery backup option in case of power failures. Most standard straight stairlifts are powered from the mains. Most curved stairlifts run from rechargeable batteries, which are continually topped up from charging points at the top and the bottom of the stairs. This needs accurate re-siting at the charging point because of a warning bleep if it is in the wrong place.

OUTSIDE USE

Because stairlifts only need 24v of power to run, most can be installed outside, with the controls at the top and bottom housed in a lockable stainless steel box, and a removable control key on the stairlift itself.

VERTICAL/THROUGH FLOOR LIFTS

Vertical, or through floor lifts, maximise the independence of an individual by enabling him/her to move from one floor to another within the home or a public building. They are useful to wheelchair users as they make it unnecessary for them to transfer out of their chair and onto, for example, a stairlift.

However, vertical lifts need more space than a stairlift and it is sometimes necessary to make structural alterations to the property.

It is essential that the lifts are installed by a qualified engineer, that regular maintenance is carried out and that lifts are inspected and tested every six months by a qualified lift engineer.

VERTICAL LIFTS WITHOUT A SHAFT



Vertical lifts without a shaft are commonly used in home environments as they require less structural alterations than lifts with a shaft.

Although versions are available that carry a seated or standing passenger, most are used by wheelchair users. The lift car is either partially or fully enclosed and usually travels up and down a wall-fixed track/s. Partially enclosed cars enable the user to see outside and may be more suitable for users who do not like enclosed spaces. The doors on totally or partially enclosed carriages are electronically interlocked as a safety precaution so that they can not be opened when the lift is moving and the lift will not move if the door is open.

In order to travel between floors a trap door or aperture is constructed in the ceiling/floor which automatically opens and closes. When the lift is on the ground floor the gap in the ceiling is covered by an infill that matches the ceiling of the room, whilst in the upper room the infill blends in with the carpet in that room.

VERTICAL LIFTS WITH A SHAFT

Lifts for use in any nursing, residential or public building must be enclosed within a shaft and usually require extensive structural alterations. Shafts are usually made of sheet metal or glass, and therefore require minimal building disruption during installation.

They can carry more than one person at a time, either someone standing, someone in a wheelchair or both. They can be accessed via a ramp or recessed into a shallow pit for level access.

CONSIDERATIONS WHEN CHOOSING A VERTICAL/THROUGH-FLOOR LIFT

When choosing a vertical/through-floor lift consider the following:

FOR WHEELCHAIR PASSENGERS



Level access or ramped access lift cars will be necessary. Independent users should make sure that they can open the lift door; easily; some have automatic push button controls.

FOR SEATED PASSENGERS

There is a choice of fixed seats, fold-down seats, perching seats and seats which slide forward to assist access in and out of the lift.

Some companies will fix the seat at the most appropriate height for the user.

DIMENSIONS AND HOUSE DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS

It is important that there is enough space for the user to approach and enter the lift easily. Most lifts are accessed from the front of the car but some companies are able to offer side door entry.

CONTROLS

Most lifts have push button controls sited within the car. Some companies offer alternative control mechanisms and some can position the controls to suit the user.

Illuminated controls are available and may be particularly helpful for visually impaired users.

SAFETY FEATURES

Look for the following safety features when choosing a lift:

- emergency lowering via a wind-down handle or a battery operated back-up system;
- an in car alarm or telephone to call for help;
- an overspeed governor;
- an automatic door locking mechanism when the door shuts;
- smoke and fire detection monitors within the car that will automatically take the car away from the fire and seal the ceiling aperture;

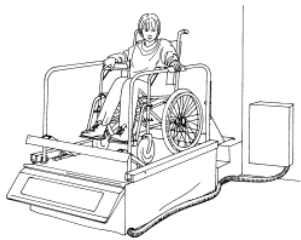
- a lockable car door, especially if there are young children in the household;
- sensors underneath the car to detect any objects that could possibly block its path, e.g. toys.

ADDITIONAL FEATURES

Most companies are also able to offer: grab rails to assist entry and exit; a telephone, lights and a carpet inside the car.

SHORT RISE LIFTS

FIXED SHORT RISE LIFTS



Short rise lifts can be used indoors or outdoors where a change in level occurs, e.g. at a front step or in a split level hallway. They are particularly useful in confined spaces where installation of a ramp is not possible. They make it possible for wheelchair users to be independent as they are able to propel directly onto the platform and move between levels without assistance. Some short rise lifts are able to carry both the wheelchair user and carer. Fixed short rise lifts may require structural alterations before installation.

Level access for pedestrians can still be provided when the lift is in its lowest position.

To enable the wheelchair user to have level access, the mechanism of many models has to be sunk below ground level in a pit so that the platform is flush with the ground at its lowest position. Where this is not possible, ramped access to the platform will be necessary. Some platforms lift vertically so that they would have to be placed next to, or instead of, steps; others have a bridging mechanism so that when not in use the steps can be used in the normal way and, when in use, the platform lifts up and over the steps.

Check whether the lift has back-up emergency battery in case of mains failure. Side support rails are advisable.

MOBILE/PORTABLE SHORT RISE LIFTS



These lifts do not require structural alterations. They may be useful for overcoming a small change in level which does not need to be accessed very often, e.g. into the garden, on to a stage.

The lifts may be operated electrically or manually (via a foot pump) and are accessed via a ramp. The ramp then folds up whilst the lift is in use. Some enable a carer to travel with the wheelchair user. Once in position, electrically operated versions may be used independently; hydraulic versions require a carer to operate the pump.

Check how easy it is to move the lift. Those with wheels may be easier to transport.

STAIRCLIMBERS

MOBILE STAIRCLIMBERS



These are operated by a carer and are designed to climb up and down a flight of stairs, as they are not attached to the staircase they can be transported and used on different staircases. They are available either as a seated device into which the user is transferred or as an attachment that fits onto a standard manual wheelchair or powered wheelchair. Some have caterpillar tracks that grip the stairs and others have a wheel cluster which rotates to transport the user up or down. They are powered by rechargeable battery.

It is essential that the carer is familiar and has been trained with the equipment before trying to operate it. It is important to consider the staircase, as stairclimbers will only cover a certain depth of tread and only some types of stairclimber can manage curved staircases. Carer operated mobile stairlifts can be used for emergency evacuation if approval is obtained from the fire safety officer based at the local fire brigade.

STAIRCLIMBING WHEELCHAIRS

There are some powered wheelchairs with stair climbing features. Again, the environment in which they will be used needs to be considered.

SERVICE AND MAINTENANCE

Most major companies guarantee their lifts/stairlifts for one year. After this it is recommended that they are inspected every six months and serviced annually. Some companies offer an emergency call-out facility. However, check that they have fully trained service engineers on call 24 hours a day. On completion of your one year warranty most companies will offer to re-guarantee the lift for a charge. It is advisable to check these charges before purchasing.

Some stairlift companies will not supply their parts to other repair engineers.

The lift mechanism is a complicated piece of equipment and is subject to a great deal of wear and tear. It is essential that regular

maintenance is carried out and that lifts are inspected and tested every six months by a qualified lift engineer.

STAIR RAILS

Most staircases have a handrail on one side although this may not extend to the full length of the staircase. Most DIY stores sell handrails which can be used to extend the existing handrail all the way up the staircase if it is required. Adding a handrail to the other side of the staircase will provide more support where needed.

As a general rule mop stick rails with angled brackets are the easiest to grip and should extend about 300 mm beyond the top and bottom step.



Newel rails are designed to turn through 90 degrees around the newel post (the upright post of the stair banister). They provide a continuous grip as the user reaches the bottom or top of the stairs and turns the corner.

STAIR GATES

Stair gates can be fitted at the top of the stairs to prevent someone from falling down stairs, or at the bottom of the stairs

to prevent someone from climbing the stairs and putting themselves in danger. They are made of plastic, metal or wood. They can either screw onto the wall on one side with a locking mechanism on the other side, or they fit between the wall and newel post with an opening gate in the middle. This style tends to have a supporting bar at the bottom which has to be stepped over every time you want to go through the gate.

For an individual who is not able to understand the need for a barrier, the gate can provoke attempts to clamber over it. In this situation an alarm which is activated as the stairs are approached may be more appropriate.

USEFUL ADDRESSES

Centre for Accessible Environments (CAE)
70 South Lambeth Road
London SW8 1RL
Telephone: 020 7840 0125
Fax: 020 7840 5811
Textphone: 020 7840 0125
Email: info@cae.org.uk
Website: www.cae.org.uk

ASSIST UK
Redbank House
4 St Chads Street
Cheetham
Manchester
M8 8QA
Telephone: 0870 834 1044
Fax: 0870 835 3591
Textphone: 0870 770 5813
Email: general.info@assist-uk.org.uk
Website: www.assist-uk.org.uk

Lift and Escalator Industry Association
33-34 Devonshire Street
London W1N 1RF
Tel: 020 7935 3013
Fax: 020 7935 3321
Email: enquiries@leia.co.uk
Website: www.leia.co.uk

Donation Form

We hope this factsheet has proved useful to you. If you would like to help the DLF continue to provide valuable information such as this, you may wish to consider making a small donation towards our work. As a charity, we rely on the generosity of the public to help us continue to help older and disabled people lead independent lives.

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Address: _____

Postcode: _____

Please accept my gift of:

£5 £10 £20 £30 £ _____ other

Please make cheques/postal order/ CAF Voucher payable to **Disabled Living Foundation**

Or charge my: Visa CAF Mastercard Amex Maestro

Card Number / / /

Security Code (last 3 digits located on back of card, or 4 digits for Amex)

Expiry Date ___/___ Valid From ___/___ Issue No (Switch)

Name of cardholder _____ Date: ___/___/___

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