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# FURNISHING AN ARTHRITIS-FRIENDLY HOME

by Amy White

**F**urnishing a home is about more than making a space look appealing; it is also about creating a place that is functional and works for the people who use it. When you have arthritis, you may have a number of issues with mobility and functioning, such as morning stiffness, painful and less flexible joints, and reduced dexterity in your fingers. Ideally, your home should adapt to your arthritis symptoms—not the other way around.

But in far too many homes, poor design and furnishing choices make daily living harder for people with arthritis. Sofas with low seats are difficult to rise from. Hard-to-reach shelves make it difficult to put away groceries and dishes. And faucet handles that are difficult to grasp or turn can vex people with painful or swollen finger joints.

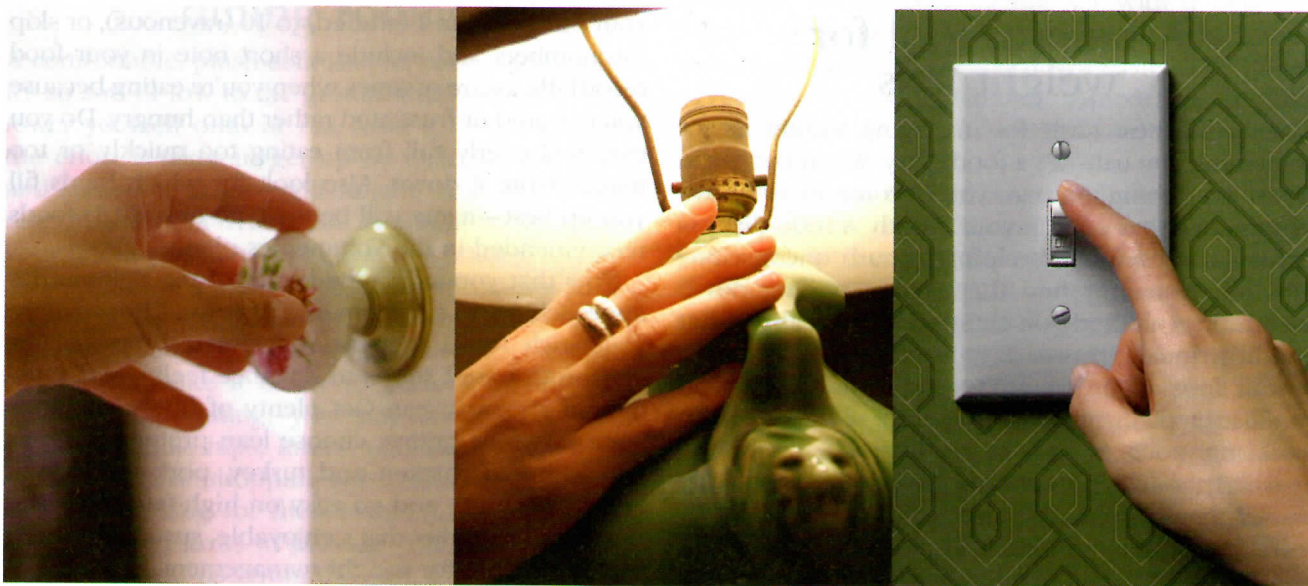
Fortunately, with some simple fixes, you can make your home work for you. Best of all, you can do it without undertaking major renovations or breaking the bank. This article offers budget-friendly ideas for simple fixes—read on for some tips to get you started.

## Safety first

Before making any changes, evaluate each room in your home and make sure it is in good repair. Loose electrical cords and missing floor tiles can pose tripping hazards, and wobbly handrails on staircases can make climbing up and down stairs dangerous. Fixing these issues can cut your risk of falls significantly, a benefit to you, your family, and future houseguests. You should also remove clutter. You'll find it much easier to move through each room if your way isn't impeded by piles of items you no longer use.

Once your house is clean and safe, take a look at your personal situation. M. Elaine Husni, MD, MPH, Vice Chair of Rheumatology and Director of the Arthritis and Musculoskeletal Center at the Cleveland Clinic in Ohio, notes that arthritis poses different problems to different people. "For some it will be getting to the second floor, for others it will be bending down or turning items. Arthritis can be unique to the individual." Think about the tasks you have trouble with and how they might be addressed.

For example, turning doorknobs may be painful



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if arthritis affects your hands. If your doors have round knobs, try lever-style handles instead. Leslie Markman-Stern of Leslie M. Stern Design in Chicago frequently installs them for her clients, noting that they are just as attractive as standard round knobs but allow for easier gripping.

If traditional toggle light switches give you trouble, replace them with rocker-style ones, which are easier to flick on and off. In place of dial-style dimmer switches, which can be difficult to grasp and turn, install slide dimmers, which have a knob that you slide up or down to raise or lower the light intensity. The hardware isn't very expensive: Many lever-style door handles are available for \$10 to \$20 each, rocker light switches cost from \$5 to \$10, and slide dimmers can cost from \$10 to \$20. If cost is an issue, swap out only the doorknobs and light switches that you use on a daily basis. If you have handy relatives or neighbors, ask for their help in installing these items, rather than hiring a repairman or electrician. If you rent your home, speak to your landlord or superintendent—he or she may be able and willing to install new fixtures if you purchase them.

## The kitchen

Perhaps more than any other room in your house, the kitchen needs to be arthritis-friendly. It's the place where you lift heavy pots and pans, handle sharp knives, and cook with hot temperatures. Fortunately, one of best tips for making a kitchen arthritis-friendly is also the most affordable: Reorganize it. This costs you nothing but time and energy—and you can seek help from a friend or family member if you need it. The payoff is a more efficient space that may minimize pain and save you time and energy when you're preparing meals. Here are some tips for reorganizing your kitchen:

- Store the items you use most frequently in the places that are easiest to reach.
- Instead of stacking plates in a high overhead cabinet, keep them in a dish rack on the counter.
- Rather than reaching into the back of a cabinet for a mug, attach hooks to the undersides of upper cabinets and hang mugs within reach.
- If you find that pots and pans are too heavy to lift, simply store them on the stovetop; they'll always be there when you need them.

Also consider some affordable modifications to shelves and cabinets. Installing lazy Susans or shelves that you can pull out can virtually double usable cabinet space, according to Dan Lee, AAHID, EDAC, President of Lee Design Group in Dallas and founder of the American Academy of Health-care Interior Designers. When it comes to cabinet handles, small, decorative knobs can be difficult to

## HOME MODIFICATION RESOURCES

One of the best sources for information on arthritis-friendly design is your health-care team. These are the people who know what your physical capabilities and limitations are, and they can suggest ways to make everyday tasks easier and more comfortable. You can also find helpful information at the following Web sites.

### FAMILY VILLAGE

[www.familyvillage.wisc.edu/general/homemods.html](http://www.familyvillage.wisc.edu/general/homemods.html)

Operated by the Waisman Center at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, this Web site lists resources related to universal design and home modifications for people with disabilities.

### HOMEMODS.ORG

[www.homemods.org](http://www.homemods.org)

This nonprofit Web site dedicates itself to home modification. Click “Resources” to find a comprehensive list of suppliers that sell assistive devices and an online library of information on home modification.

grasp and pull. If arthritis affects your finger joints, consider replacing small cabinet handles with larger ones. D-shaped cabinet handles are best. It doesn't require as much dexterity to grab a large, D-shaped cabinet handle as it does a tiny knob. Depending on the style and finish, you can spend as little as \$3 per handle.

The right faucet for the kitchen sink can help ease the strain on your fingers and wrists. Single-lever faucets are easy to turn with a nudge from a finger or wrist. Always test a faucet before you buy it to make sure the lever is wide enough to hold and easy to turn. Some single-lever faucets are available for under \$100 at your local hardware store or online.

Dinner can take a long time to prepare, and arthritis can make you feel every minute of that time. If you find it difficult to stand for prolonged periods, consider sitting in a chair or on a stool as you prepare meals. In addition, make sure your work surface is at a proper height for the task—a counter or table that is too tall or too short can add to discomfort. Kitchen work that requires a lot of force, such as chopping, should be done on a counter lower than elbow height, but not so low that you need to stoop. More precise tasks, such as icing cupcakes,



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demand more elbow support, so the work surface should be at or slightly higher than elbow height. When sitting on a kitchen stool, your elbows should rest comfortably on the counter.

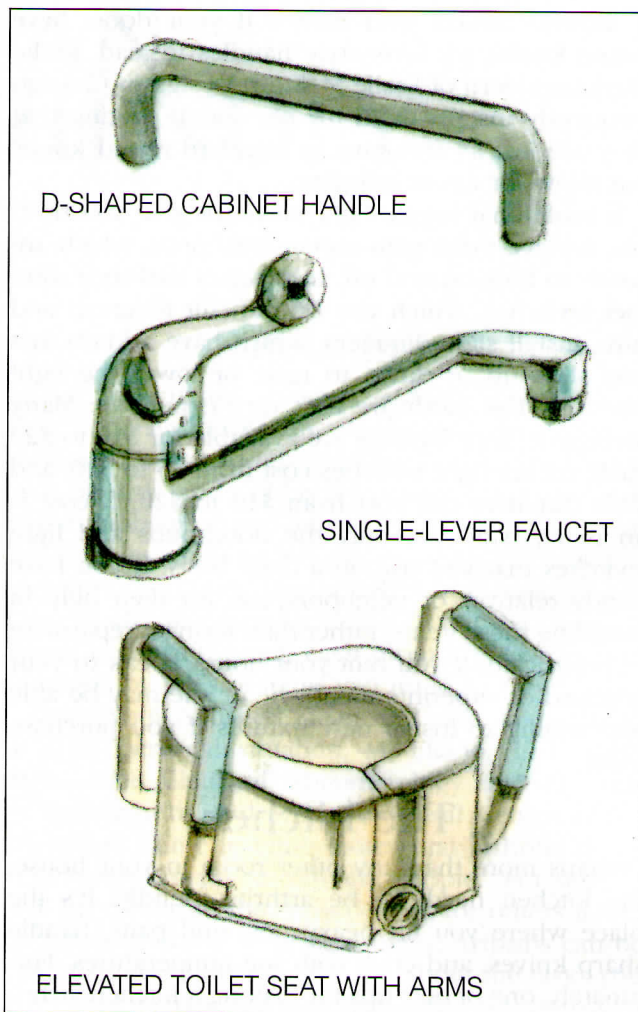
Changing the height of kitchen counters is costly, but buying a portable kitchen island or kitchen cart costs less. You can pull out a kitchen island on wheels during dinner prep and push it away when you no longer need it. Before purchasing any portable kitchen island, make sure it is the right height for you. You can find portable islands and carts for \$100 to \$200 in stores, but you might get one for even less at a garage sale or thrift shop.

Once you cook dinner, you have to transport all of those dishes to the dining table and then to the dishwasher. Instead of carrying dishes around by hand, save your energy and use a bar cart. Bar carts vary greatly in price, but you can find them for as little as \$130 at retailers like Walmart and Amazon.com. You can also use a bar cart to move heavy pots across your kitchen or groceries from your front door to your pantry. When you're not using the cart, put it in the dining room, where it will look like a stylish piece of furniture.

## The living and dining rooms

A comfortable, plush sofa isn't so comfortable when it's so soft or low to the ground that you can't easily lower yourself onto or rise from it. You can lessen the effort it takes to get up by making sure chairs and sofas are at the right height. Your feet should rest on the floor when you're sitting upright, with your knees positioned as close to a 90-degree angle as possible. If a chair is too low, add risers to the legs. If a sofa is too high, consider removing its legs. And if a chair is too soft, add a portable raised cushion to make it easier to get out of the chair. By adjusting seating, you may reduce the strain on your hands, hips, knees, and ankles when you stand. If you're shopping for new seating, Mr. Lee suggests looking for firm cushions, straight backs, and extended arms to provide you with additional support as you rise from the seat.

Dining chairs may also be hard to rise from, but unlike your living room chairs, they are a little harder to retrofit. If arthritis in your knees or hips makes it difficult to use your dining chairs, it might



D-SHAPED CABINET HANDLE

SINGLE-LEVER FAUCET

ELEVATED TOILET SEAT WITH ARMS

be worth it to invest in a new set. Mr. Lee suggests replacing a traditional dining set with a counter-height table and mid-height bar stools, which may make getting up and sitting down easier. The prices of counter-height tables are comparable to and sometimes more affordable than traditional dining tables.

Another mark against traditional dining tables is polishing them. Such home upkeep, including shampooing carpets, may be the last thing you want to do on days when your arthritis symptoms are severe. If you do want to invest in new furnishings, consider whether the items are easy to clean and maintain.

As for window treatments, try to keep all opening and closing mechanisms below shoulder level. Reaching overhead to open and close curtains and blinds may strain painful shoulders. Attach a curtain pull wand, sometimes called a drapery baton, to draperies so you can slide them easily along the rod—a simple \$10 fix. Tie a string to the cord on your blinds to lengthen them so you can open or close the blinds without reaching overhead. If there are children in your home, just be sure to cut any loops in cords, for safety's sake.



## The bathroom

Bathrooms are wet zones, meaning that the potential for falls is high. Install grab bars in places where the risk for falls is greatest—in the shower and by the toilet. Grab bars no longer look like they belong in hospitals. Manufacturers of bathroom fittings now design wall-mounted grab bars in a variety of finishes; you can easily find a style that goes with the look of your bathroom. This type of grab bar, however, needs a secure attachment. Enlist the help of a professional to screw them into studs in the wall. Designer grab bars can be expensive, but you can find more reasonable models ranging from \$20 to \$100. For the bathtub, clamp-on or suction-cup bars and rails are available for \$20 and up.

Another way to increase comfort in the bathroom is to adjust the height of your toilet. A taller toilet seat can help if you experience pain in your hips or knees. Special toilets called comfort-height toilets, which are three or four inches taller than standard toilets, are available, but they can cost several hundred dollars, and you will need to hire a plumber to remove your old toilet and install the new one. A less expensive alternative is a raised toilet seat; it is easy to install, and you can take it with you if you move to a new home. You can find a raised toilet seat online for as little as \$20. Some models are available with arms for added safety.

As in the kitchen, consider replacing your old, hard-to-turn bathroom faucets with single-lever ones. Single-lever faucets in the shower and bathtub will be easier for you to turn, especially on those mornings when you need a warm bath or shower to loosen up those stiff joints.

## Benefits for future homeowners

As you can see, making your home more arthritis-friendly doesn't require great expense or extensive changes that make your home feel institutional like a hospital. Your home can still look and feel like a comfortable retreat from a stressful world. An added bonus, according to Ms. Markman-Stern, is that your house "can be easily sold to a young family with children, and they will thank you for these comfortable, attractive, and safe choices." The design options that make sense for people with arthritis also make sense for young children, the elderly, those with disabilities, and anyone who wants to live in a home that will suit their needs now and for years to come. □

*Amy White is a freelance writer based in Ontario, Canada.*

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