

## **Aging in Place: Kitchens and Meal Preparation**

Handout 1

### **Introduction**

The kitchen is the heart of most homes. Food is our common ground, our universal experience. The ability to prepare meals not only enables us to meet our dietary needs but also reinforces our feelings of independence and self-confidence. Meal preparation can also be challenging and potentially dangerous. By learning about kitchen safety and assistive devices in the kitchen, we can prolong the time we are able to be self-sufficient in the kitchen.

### **Design**

Almost everyone can benefit from a universally designed kitchen. It not only accommodates people of varying ages, heights, and abilities, but also allows the kitchen to adapt to the changing needs of an individual over time, or for a short period of time. Examples include the 80-year-old who still cooks her own meals and the 30-year-old who returns home with a broken leg. (**This picture of a universally designed kitchen** shows a raised dishwasher, multiple heights on cabinets, borders around the edge of the countertop as well as the cabinetry on the floor, knee room under the sink, a single lever faucet, drawers on top of the counter, and U-shaped handles on the drawers and cabinets.)



**Floor Layout:** Virtually any kitchen size can incorporate universal design features. In terms of floor space, however, plan for a minimum of 30" to 48" in front of each appliance and work surface, and 42" - to 48"-wide aisles to make the kitchen universally accessible. An island must not impede access to any part of the kitchen or workflow, and it should be large enough to be useful.

**Cabinets and Countertops:** Three countertop heights are typically provided in a universal design kitchen: a 42" to 45" standing height, the standard 34" to 36" work surface height, and a 30" to 32" height for seated cooks and children. Other universal design features for countertops include:

- Heat-proofed surfaces (especially near cooking appliances).
- Raised-edge detail on countertops to prevent spills and to provide a visual and tactile indicator of the countertop edge.
- Combined light and dark surfaces for visual contrast. (It's easier to see light-colored ingredients on a dark surface, and vice-versa.)
- No sharp corners and edges on countertops.

All cabinet handles should be U-shaped, or the cabinet should be opened with an open hand.

**Kitchen Sink:** Universal design features for the kitchen sink include the following:

- Sink depth is no deeper than seven inches.
- Sink has one faucet, not two.
- Water is controlled with one level handle.
- The faucet and controls are easy to reach (on the side is recommended).
- An anti-scald device is installed.
- There is a spray hose for the sink.
- There is knee space under the sink.

**Lighting:** Good light helps make any kitchen safe and comfortable. Natural light is important, but think about the places that natural light won't reach or light well. Generally, a mix of three lighting modes is ideal in the kitchen, as follows:

- **Ambient light** – for overall room illumination, typically provided by ceiling, track or recessed lighting fixtures. The number and placement of fixtures should provide even illumination without dark spots or "hot" spots.
- **Task lighting** – for shadow-free, concentrated lighting of food preparation and other kitchen work activities. Typically comes from under-cabinet fixtures or strips, or hanging fixtures such as pendent lights.
- **Accent lighting** – contributes a decorative element and helps create focal points such as a dish display, a favorite painting, or an eating area. May come from high-intensity recessed or track lights, or hanging fixtures.

## Appliances

**Refrigerator:** Side-by-side refrigerators are easier to use for individuals in wheelchairs, or those who are using a rolling chair to maneuver around the kitchen. Refrigerators also come with the freezer on bottom, which puts the refrigerator part at a higher level.

**Oven/Stove:** The controls for the stove should be placed on the front or the side of the range top. The stove or cook top can be installed so that a wheelchair can fit under the counter, giving seated access to the cooking area. Other cook tops are adjustable, so they can accommodate various users. A built-in oven with a side-opening door is easier to load and unload.

**Microwave Oven:** A touch-control microwave oven placed at counter height provides easy cooking access for people of various ages and physical abilities. Other features to look for include electronic sensors that automatically and correctly cook specific foods, audio and visual "cooking complete" signals, and digital help displays that explain how to operate the microwave.

**Dishwasher:** Look for dishwashers with automatic soil content, water temperature, and cycle-selection sensors, flexible loading features such as fold-down tines, a lock-out switch to prevent accidental operation, an easy-to-read display, and electronic problem indicators. Try raising the dishwasher level by placing a larger toe kick underneath.

**Washer and Dryer:** Look for models that can be easily loaded and unloaded by people with mobility impairments. Controls should be within easy reach.

## Cooking Gadgets and Eating Aids

There are many products on the market that are designed to make cooking and eating easier. Some are designed with limited strength and dexterity in mind and others are designed for use with one hand. Luckily, more and more kitchen items are being designed using Universal Design principles that can be enjoyed by all. For example, OXO\* (Good Grips) uses the principles of Universal Design and has created the following:

- A salad spinner that can be used with one hand
- Liquid measuring cups that can be read from above without bending over
- A backlit oven thermometer that can be read easily through the window of an oven door
- Kettles with whistle lids that open automatically when tipped to pour
- Kitchen tools with pressure absorbing, non-slip handles that make them more efficient.

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\*Mention of specific brands for demonstration purposes should not be considered an endorsement by the University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service.

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