





Having a stairlift in your home

An impartial guide to choosing the right stairlift for your home





This guide has been designed to assist anyone who is considering the purchase of a stairlift. It is an impartial guide produced by Dolphin Mobility Ltd, with the assistance of occupational therapists, housing managers and charities.

The guide is designed to help you decide whether you need a stairlift, and if so, how you can go about choosing one that is right for your needs.

In recent times the stairlift industry has had its share of bad publicity. There have been many reports of mis-selling, over pricing and poor service, however, there are many reputable companies offering good products and service, with a few sensible precautions you should be able to acquire the right equipment at a reasonable price. (See pages 14 &15 for sales tips and advice).

Dolphin Stairlifts

Dolphin Stairlifts is a group of independent companies specialising in the supply, installation and maintenance of stairlifts. Founded in 1988, we now have more local branches throughout the UK and Ireland than any other stairlift company.

Over the years Dolphin have established themselves as the leading independent supplier of stairlifts to both private individuals and local authorities. As approved agents for the leading manufacturers we can provide the user with both new and reconditioned stairlifts for straight or curved stairs. In addition to stairlifts we supply a wide range of other equipment including bath lifts, wheelchair lifts, hoists and step lifts.

Stairs a problem?

You are probably reading this booklet because you, or someone that you know, are starting to find that climbing the stairs is becoming a hazardous experience, or just hard work. You are faced with a dilemma. Do you move to a new home? Or do you find another solution?

Get advice

Once you start considering the possibility of having a stairlift, you begin to delve into what can be a highly technical area. However sure you are of what you want, we strongly recommend that you take professional advice from someone with experience in this field. In most areas, informed advice is available from community occupational therapists (OT's) who are usually based in the Social Services department of your local council.

Funding

Even if you have taken advice and you know what you need, it is not advisable to start having the house adapted if you are considering applying for a grant. If you live in council or housing association property, funding can sometimes be obtained from them. Home Improvement, Housing Repair and Disabled Facility Grants are available to people that live in their own home, however most grants are means tested and the process can take several months or even years. For more detailed information on the grant system you can visit the website of the UK government at www.direct.gov.uk.

If you are unable to fund the purchase yourself, there are some charities that are able to assist. SSAFA (for ex-servicemen and their families) is particularly helpful, as can be former employers benevolent funds. Support groups and O/Ts may assist with searching for funding. Don't be afraid to ask for help, you may be surprised by the support that is available. There is a list of useful organisations on page 13.

Assessing your accommodation

If you have serious trouble with stairs, you need to look at every available option in order to decide on the best course of action. Your current medical condition or future prognosis may make the transferring on and off a stairlift unsafe for you.

Wheelchair users should consider the option of a through floor lift, unless absolutely certain that transfers will be safe. Wheelchair Lifts can be installed in any downstairs room where the lift can travel vertically through an aperture in the ceiling to the room above.

Moving or conversion

For some people moving home is the ideal solution. Accommodation on one level, such as a bungalow or ground floor flat might be better for you, if you would be happy to make a move. You might consider finding a house suitable for conversion to your needs. In this case grants can sometimes be obtained, but the local authority have to take into account just how suitable the house is for a person with mobility problems. For example, you will not get a grant if the property is on a steep bank with outside steps. Your local council can give you advice on what is acceptable. Obviously moving can be very stressful, not to mention costly. If you don't want to move, you need to think about converting your own home or making some less radical alterations to make life easier for you.

Ground floor toilet

You may think of installing a downstairs toilet or bathroom, but if you are still sleeping upstairs, installing a stairlift may be the first option to consider. However, a stairlift or through floor lift is not necessarily the best way for you to get to the toilet if getting on and off the lift will prove too slow. There may be a case for both ground floor toilet and a stairlift, so you still have access to your rooms upstairs. This is where professional advice is essential. There are several companies specialising in bathroom adaptations for the less able, ask your O/T for the name of an approved contractor.

A downstairs bedroom

Many people do not like this idea, especially where there is no downstairs toilet and there is only one living room. It may be the practical solution if you are bed ridden and would otherwise be isolated upstairs.

Choosing a Lift

Let us assume that you have decided that you need some sort of lift. If you are wheelchair bound, or likely to be in the future, a through floor wheelchair lift is likely to be the best option, particularly if transfers are a problem.

Try before you buy

Each persons requirements are different. There are several manufacturers of stairlifts and each of them has a variety of options that have been designed for specific mobility issues. This is why it is important for you to seek information from someone that has experience of all the lifts, so that they can advise you which is the most suitable for your condition.

You should therefore try out a stairlift or through floor lift before you spend any money. You can do this at a demonstration centre, local showroom or in someone's home.

Be aware that the price of stairlifts can vary greatly so when seeking advice always ask more than one company. There is more information on this later on in the guide.

Demonstration Centres

There are over 40 Disabled Living Centres (or Independent Living Centres) in the UK. Most of these have a range of stairlifts for you to try. The Centres themselves have well informed and helpful staff, many of whom are occupational therapists or physiotherapists, and can give impartial advice. A list of the centres can be found online at www.assist-uk.org/centres/ or by contacting Assist UK on 0870 770 2866.

Dolphin Stairlifts also have many showrooms throughout the UK with products on show from the leading manufacturers.

Layout of stairs

There are two types of stairlift. Straight and curved. The first is designed for straight stairs. The footrest of the lift will normally stop level with the top stair. It may be possible to use a straight stairlift on some configurations of curved stairs.



The second, and generally far more expensive type, is a 'made to measure' or 'curved track' stairlift which can travel around bends on the stairs and can be made to run onto the landing. Prices vary according to the length of the stairs, the number of bends and the complexity of the bends.



It is worth noting that although far more expensive, the resale value is negligible, as the rail is made to measure and can only be re-installed on identical stairs. Curved track stairlifts can be fitted on either side of the stairs, the layout of your staircase will determine which is most suitable. If you need a curved track stairlift you will need to pay a deposit to the company that you are dealing with. This will normally be about 30% of the cost of the lift. The deposit is required because the company are committing themselves to building a stairlift rail that will only fit into your house. There is more information on deposits in our sales advice section later on in the booklet. You should not have to pay a large deposit if you order a standard straight lift as these can usually be adapted to suit another staircase.

Folding Platforms

In certain circumstances it is possible to fit a straight stairlift on stairs that have a turn at the top. For example if you have a straight run of stairs with three steps winding onto the landing. Or a straight flight and a quarter landing with two more steps, a folding platform stairlift could be the solution. A straight stairlift is installed with extended legs, so the footrest stops in line with the landing. A solid wooden platform is then built around the footrest of the lift.

This platform can then be used to walk safely onto the landing. The platform is hinged so that it can be folded back against the wall to enable other people in the house to use the stairs. It is also possible to have a powered platform so the user doesn't have to bend to raise it. Please note that the folding platform option is not suitable for everyone. If you are prone to dizzy spells or feinting or if you have very poor mobility this is not a viable option. Seek independent advice and take into account how a change in your condition may effect your ability to use a platform lift.

Doorway problems

If a door at the top or the bottom of the stairs may be blocked by the rail of the stairlift, there are a number of models designed to overcome this problem. Some manufacturers are able to produce a rail with reduced overhang upstairs, so the lift will not protrude as far into the hallway. This may solve the problem at the top of your stairs and is a very cost effective solution.

If there is a door or passageway at the bottom of the stairs then it is likely that you will need a folding track or hinged rail stairlift. This means that the bottom section of the rail can be folded out of the way when the lift is not being used. This will allow you to gain access to a door that would be blocked by a normal rail and also means that there is no tripping hazard if you have an open hallway downstairs.

If the layout of your stairs is similar to that in the above photo's, then you will definitely need to have a hinged track stairlift. The hinged rail option is available from most suppliers but the cost and quality can vary greatly. Seek independent advice and consider if you would be able to fold the rail manually or if you would require powered operation. Most people do need the powered version as the mechanism can be quite heavy. Unfortunately these options will add to the cost of the lift.





The only other option is to stop the rail of the lift short, to prevent it protruding as far into the hallway. This might make getting off the lift dangerous and is not an ideal solution by any means. Again you must seek advice, preferably from an occupational therapist. Also take into account that while you may be able to use the lift this way in the short term you may find it impossible in the future. Some companies may not consider it an option as they feel there is too much risk involved.

Parking positions

On curved stairlifts parking positions can be fairly flexible. On straight lifts however, they are normally parked either at the bottom, (taking up a space of about 700 mm (27") from the first step), or at the top. A common belief is that the lift continues along the landing at the top. This is not the case, the chair will still be on the staircase. If you have a hinged track, there may be a parking point part way up the stairs. Obviously if the chair is parked on the stairs it will restrict the space available for others using the stairs. Most stairlifts fold up to a width of 300-375 mm (12-15").

Weight Limits

Most stairlifts have a maximum capacity of between 18 and 21 stones, however some have heavy duty options of up to 28 stones. This option will add to the price of the lift but is essential for ensuring safe and reliable use. You must make sure that you don't exceed the weight limit for the model that you choose.

Width of stairs

A stairlift can be installed in most homes, all stairlifts on sale in the UK are fitted to the tread of the stairs, normally screwed through the carpet. (Certain wheelchair lifts may be wall fixed in public buildings). The most common problem which prevents installation, is the width of the staircase. In theory a lift will fit onto a staircase that is 690 mm (27") wide. In practice the user may not be able to use the lift because there is insufficient clearance for their knees. Most people will require about 750 mm (29½") to be able to operate the lift comfortably.

A useful tip is to place a chair at the bottom of the stairs with the back touching the wall. Sit on the chair as far back as is comfortable and pull your knees as close to the edge of the seat as you can. You should then be able to estimate how much clearance you would have if you installed a stairlift in your home. If you have open banisters, they should be re-instated for the safety of other users. Spindled banisters may also present a hazard, if the user is unable to hold their feet on the footrest. It may be desirable to infill them with a sheet of perspex or mdf.



Sit/Stand & Perching seats

If bending at the hip or knees presents a problem then this type of seat could be the answer. It can also be used on staircases that are too narrow to accommodate a standard seated lift.





Be aware that to be able to use these options safely you must have good balance and be mobile enough to get on and off the lift safely. If you are prone to dizzy spells then this is not going to be suitable.

It is also worth thinking about how long it will take the lift to get to the top of the stairs. On a standard set of stairs you could expect the lift to take about 40 seconds. That can be a long time to stand for some people.

Choice of controls

This is another important issue to consider when you are buying a stairlift. There are many types of control and they vary according to which manufacturers product you choose.

You will need to consider which type of control will be most suitable for you. To use the stairlift you will have to be able to keep the control button pressed for the whole length of the trip. If you suffer from arthritis, for example, this could be quite painful.

A joystick or toggle control would be easier to use in these circumstances as it will take the pressure off your fingers and is easier on the wrists. It is also possible to have an attendant control so someone else in the house can send the lift up and down for you. These can be fixed to the wall or kept in a safe place near to the stairlift. It is important to choose the control that you feel most comfortable with.

Swivel Seats

There are a number of options available to make using the lift easier. An occupational therapist or an impartial sales adviser will be able to specify the ones that are suitable for the users needs.

The most obvious option is to have a swivel seat stairlift. This means that you can swivel the chair when you reach the top of the stairs, so that you are facing away from the staircase when you get off. This makes it much easier and safer to get on and off the lift. The stairlift chair then acts as a barrier so that if you were to lose balance you could not fall down the stairs. A swivel seat is a standard option on most stairlifts these days, so you shouldn't have to pay extra. If possible try and visit a showroom to compare the different stairlifts available.







Powered swivel seats are also available if you are unable to turn the seat yourself. This will add to the cost quite significantly and the quality can vary according to the manufacturer. As always seek independent advice and get prices from more than one source. If a powered swivel isn't necessary at the moment but could be useful in the future make sure the seat can be adapted.

A recent development is the option of a two-way powered swivel. This enables the user to get off the seat in the most convenient position at the top and bottom of the stairs. This is a costly option and isn't necessary for most people, however it can be of great use in certain circumstances. At the time of going to press only one of the manufacturers is able to provide this option.

Folding the seat/footrest

If there are other people in the house, that won't be using the lift, you will want to be able to fold the chair up when you have finished. This enables someone to walk past the lift safely. The arms of the chairs are very light and most people are able to lift them with ease. More people struggle with lifting the seat and more specifically the footrest. If this will cause you problems then you need to bear this in mind when choosing your lift.

Some manufacturers have designed a link between the footrest and the seat or the arm of the lift. When you raise the arm or seat the footrest folds up as well. This is the cheapest option but still requires some strength to lift. Try one out and see if you can get along with it. If this is too difficult then there are also powered footrest raisers that will do the job for you. These will raise the footrest at the touch of a button or in some instances when the seat pad is lifted. Inside the chair is a small motor which smoothly raises the footrest into a fully folded position. This will add to the price of the lift but, once more, there is lots of choice so shop around.

Safety

Safety is paramount, all stairlifts must be CE marked the relevant British standard is BS 5776. A host of safety features are included on all stairlifts, these include safety cut outs on all edges to prevent trapping or injury to the user and others.

Seatbelt or Harness

For most people a standard lap seat belt will be sufficient. The ride quality on newer stairlifts is very good and many users feel comfortable not using a seatbelt.

However there are of course certain ailments and disabilities which make it essential to have more support. There is a wide range of harnesses available but not all of the manufacturers are able to fit them. Leg straps are also available on certain products.

If you need a harness or if you may need one in the future, make sure it can be fitted to the chair that you are buying.





Mains or Battery Powered?

Almost all stairlifts are now battery powered. The charger is plugged into the mains supply. Some lifts charge constantly, others when the lift is parked at the top and bottom of the rail. Some manufacturers offer the choice of mains powered lifts. The advantage of battery power is that the lift will continue to function in the event of mains power failure. The disadvantage is that batteries will eventually need replacing. They should however last 3/4 years. It is essential that the power supply is always connected. If you go away and turn the power off, the batteries will probably need to be replaced on your return.

Call Stations

All stairlifts should come fitted with call stations upstairs and downstairs, as standard, allowing the user to call or send the lift as required. Each manufacturer has different methods of operation. Some are hard wired, these will normally be fitted to the wall or newel post and will require surface trunking to be fitted. Others are remote control, either using infra red or radio signal. These do not need to be attached to any surface.

New or Second-hand?

Most stairlifts can be purchased new or second-hand (reconditioned). Most reconditioned stairlifts will not look like new lifts. If you are buying second-hand, ensure that you know what you are getting. Ask for the make, model and age of the machine.

Second-hand lifts will normally come with a full 12 month warranty, and should be equally as reliable as new. The life expectancy of a stairlift should be in excess of 10 years. However lifts manufactured before 1995, are unlikely to comply with current regulations.

Due to the high cost of manufacture of curved track stairlifts, a few companies 'remanufacture' curved track lifts. Whilst there is no evidence that they are not fit for purpose, they will not comply with British Standards, and the manufacturers will not support them if your supplier goes out of business. Ensure that you are not being sold a second-hand stairlift as new.

A second-hand chair and carriage can be safely installed on a new curved rail. This will usually save about £800 compared to the cost of a new lift.

Rentals

Many companies offer a rental option for straight stairlifts. Most will charge an upfront fee for installation, service and removal, followed by a monthly rental fee. If you require a stairlift for anything but a very short term, it is normally cheaper to buy a second-hand lift. It is not normally possible to rent curved stairlifts.

Maintenance

Stairlift manufacturers recommend that you have the equipment serviced annually. The main purpose of the maintenance is to keep the lift clean to ensure it runs smoothly and most importantly to test the safety circuits. Before you buy a stairlift find out how much the company charges for service visits. Ask them what their callout charge is for breakdowns and if they will attend if you don't have a contract with them. Some companies are not interested in servicing and after sales care, consequently you could be left with a stairlift that nobody wants to maintain.

Useful Contacts

Advice is freely available from your local Department of Social Services. The address and phone number will be available in the phone book under the name of the local council, usually under the sub-heading 'Social Services'. Either contact your nearest office of the Department or phone the local authority to find out which is your office. There are many other organisations that offer advice and support to people that find themselves in need of a stairlift. We have listed some of the most useful contacts below.

Anchor Staying Put - 0191 270 6069

Disabled Living Foundation - 0845 130 9177

Macmillan Cancer Line - 0808 808 2020

Citizens Advice - 020 7833 2181

Care & Repair England - 0115 950 6500

DIAL UK - 01302 310 123

Alzheimer's Society - 0845 300 0336

The Stroke Association - 0845 3033 100

Parkinson's Disease Society - 0808 800 0303

The Royal British Legion - 08457 725 725

Age Concern - 0800 00 99 66

SSAFA Forces Help - 0845 1300 975

Assist UK - 0870 770 2866

Sales Tips and Advice

- · Do not pay for a quotation.
- Always get more than one quote.
- Ask your local authority who they use.
- Try a manufacturer and a local supplier to get a comparison.
- When you telephone ask questions, ask for an approximate price and write it down.
- Remember if you buy from the newspaper, it will be you paying for the advert.
- Some companies trade using more than one name and advertise on the same page of a newspaper as if they have no connection.
- If possible have another family member or an O/T present.
- Ask plenty of questions about the product, take brochures and read them, know what you're buying.
- · Compare features, prioritise what is most important.
- An independent supplier can tell you about a range of different lifts.
- Ask about maintenance costs, will they still look after your lift even if you don't sign up to an expensive contract?
- · A reputable firm will always maintain your lift.
- Who will look after your lift if it breaks down?
- · How many service branches do they have?
- · How many engineers do they have in your area?
- Are you paying too much? Many salesmen start with a high price and discount to close a sale. A reputable company will quote the best price from the start. Do not feel pressurised into signing up on the day. This is a sure sign that the salesman is hiding something from you.
- Don't believe special offers, which only apply if you buy now.
- Cheapest is not the best if there is no after sales care.
- Most expensive does not necessarily mean that it is the best product, or the best service.
- Make sure that they are able to supply spare parts, are they approved distributors for the lift they are selling?
- Ask about warranty terms and conditions, all lifts should have 12 months warranty, you may have to pay extra if you want 24 hour call out cover.
- · What are their response times?
- Very few suppliers do actually provide same day service.
- If you are buying a straight stairlift you should not have to part with a large deposit, if any at all.
- If you do have to give a deposit, ask for their cancellation policy in writing.
- Compare quotations, are they like for like?
- Whilst we don't recommend the practice of re-manufacturing curved stairlift rails it is possible to use the chair or motor carriage again.

- If possible try a lift out in a Disabled Living Centre showroom or in someone's house.
- Do as much research as possible, there are many companies in this industry who sell at highly inflated prices. Even the big names that you may have heard of are sometimes guilty of this.
- Ask if the company has a buy back policy and get it in writing if they say they do. Manufacturers

To our knowledge, the following companies are the only manufacturers currently serving the UK market, all others are likely to be 'badged': Stannah, Minivator, Bison Bede, Meditek, Freelift, Thyssen, Acorn and Lift Able.

Most manufacturers sell to both trade suppliers and end users, but obviously only sell their own products.

Dolphin can also supply the following products:

- Electric Lift & Rise Recliner Chairs
- Swimming Pool Hoists
- Ceiling Track and Portable Hoists
- · Wheelchair Lifts
- Portable Ramps

Online stairlift guide at www.stairlift.co.uk





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