

# A BUYERS GUIDE TO 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 9am – 5pm on 01323 444861

Alternatively you can write to our letter enquiry service or contact us via email at [stairlifts@ajmobility.co.uk](mailto:stairlifts@ajmobility.co.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.

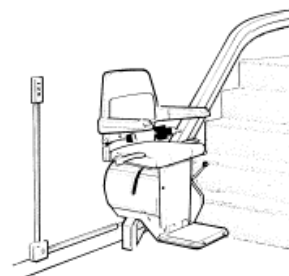
Make sure that the track will be long enough to fit your stairs; a track that covers 14 stairs in one house might only cover 13 in another. The length is the important factor - as an approximate guide, the length required is the length of the face of the stairs from the top nosing to the hall floor plus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

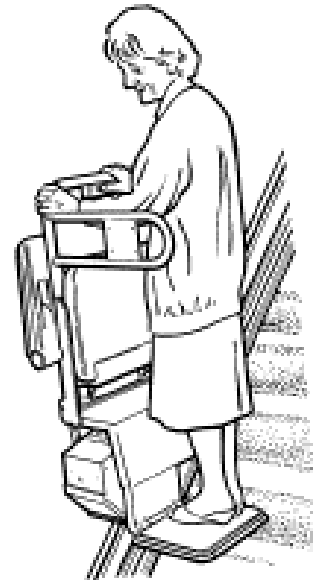
Check that you are able to manipulate the controls for both the footrest and the swivel seat.

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.

## 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



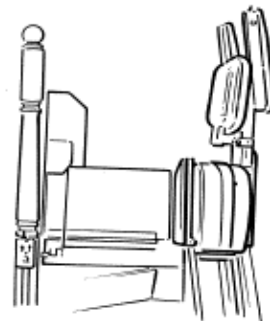
If your staircase has a sub-landing at the top, with a few steps to the left or right, most companies can fit a manual or

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?

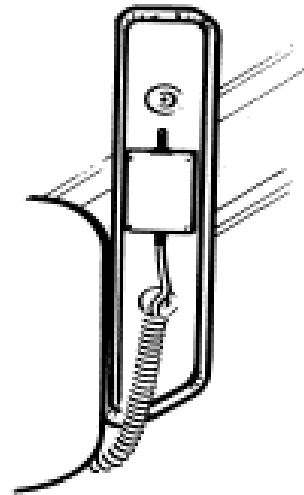


Will the controls need to be sited in another position?

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.

## 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.

## MORE INFORMATION

For more information please contact one of our trained Mobility Advisors:

Telephone: **01323 444861**

Email: [stairlifts@ajmobility.co.uk](mailto:stairlifts@ajmobility.co.uk)

Or visit our showrooms and try one of our stairlifts in person:

### HAILSHAM

**17 North Crescent  
Diplocks Way  
Hailsham  
East Sussex  
BN27 3JF**



### BEXHILL-ON-SEA

**5 Sackville Road  
Bexhill on Sea  
East Sussex  
TN39 3JB**

