

# Bath vs Shower

## for children & adults with muscular dystrophy & allied neuromuscular conditions

*A guide to help disabled children, adults and their families make a well-informed choice*

To be used in conjunction with:

- Chapter 8a     *Equipment for Adaptations;*
- Chapter 9     *Hoisting;*
- Chapter 18    *Addresses: Manufacturers/Suppliers/Sources of Advice.*

### Factors influencing the choice

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## Outcome of the equipment assessment

The assessment of both showering and bathing equipment is the key to the choices available. The following criteria need to be considered:

- the optimum shower/toilet chair and the person's ability to use the shower independently;
- a comparison of the ease of showering with that of bathing for both the disabled person and the carer;
- the most suitable method for getting in and out of the bath independently or with help;
- the need to provide support in the bath;
- the need to provide support on the toilet, and, if a shower toilet is needed, to ensure the support provides the optimum washing and drying facility;
- the optimum method of transfer between the bedroom and bathroom.

These issues are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 8a *Equipment for Adaptations*.

## Available space

The space within the existing bathroom should not be the main criterion unless there is no opportunity to enlarge the room. Ideally, an alternative bathroom for the exclusive use of the disabled person should be provided, if necessary by building an extension.

## Whether the bathroom is for the exclusive use of the disabled person

Where possible, facilities should be for the exclusive use of the disabled person. They are likely to be slow in the bathroom, making it impractical for sharing with others. Also, much of the equipment is specialised and not ideal for the rest of the family. It is important that the needs of all the family are considered.

## Bath - Advantages

- Bathtime for a young family can be an important playtime and social occasion to be shared with other members of the family.
- Deep water provides buoyancy and freedom of movement. This is a great advantage to anyone with no voluntary movement in their limbs. It can be the most important reason for choosing a bath for a boy with Duchenne muscular dystrophy (DMD). A bath is relaxing and soothing and can help with sleep if taken before going to bed.
- A whirlpool bath can be fitted, or a standard bath can be used with a spa bath mat and separate motor; these facilities may provide great pleasure and increased relaxation to someone who has little or no movement in their limbs. It is unlikely that this would be grant aided with a Disabled Facilities Grant or an Improvement Grant, but can be purchased privately or might be funded by a Charitable Trust.
- A bath provides the opportunity to soak, which may be important for anyone who uses a wheelchair and gets hot and sticky around the bottom, particularly in the summer. It also makes it easier for feet to be soaked.

- People with neuromuscular conditions tend to feel the cold because of their immobility and muscle wasting; immersion in hot water helps them to keep warm while bathing.
- A bath can be supplied with a chair to provide support. This equipment should be provided in advance of urgent need, to help the user to feel confident in the bath.
- Anyone who leans forwards or sideways because of spinal curvature may lack balance and feel safer in a bath than in a shower.
- Equipment is available to lift someone safely in and out of the bath and avoid dangers of lifting manually. The choice is between a Mermaid Ranger (MD model) or ASM Multi-System, or a ceiling hoist, used in conjunction with an integral seat which swings in and out of the bath and is raised and lowered electrically. In addition to children, this type of bath is a solution for adults who can transfer independently. See Chapters 8a and 8b.
- If knee contractures are likely to be a problem, the *Arjo Sovereign* baths, which provide support under the knees, are available.
- Carers are able to remain dry when helping to wash the bather.
- Carers can take their own weight on the bath rim and eliminate the need to lean forwards without support that causes back strain.
- To protect the carer's back, baths can be installed raised up from the floor or a height-adjustable model used, e.g. *Arjo Sovereign* or *Kingkraft Easibath Hi-Lift*.
- A bath can (and should) be fitted with an over-bath shower or integral showerhead providing some of the additional advantages of a shower, particularly for hair washing. At a later stage, if the person has knee contractures that make it impossible to extend the legs forwards to lower the Mermaid Ranger seat to the bottom of the bath, the bath seat can be raised and the shower used to wash the top half of the body. Alternatively, an *Arjo Sovereign* bath should be considered or, if reclining is not satisfactory, one of the other bath models with an integral seat.

## Bath - Disadvantages

- From quite an early age, children may need help to get in and out of the bath. Parents who are not ready to accept the need for specialised equipment will take a risk with their backs by continuing to lift. It is difficult to observe good lifting techniques (i.e. keeping the back straight and the knees bent) when lifting out of a bath. However, simple bathing equipment with a seat, which is lowered and raised using battery power, is likely to help at this stage and is discussed in Chapter 8a.
- A bath takes up more space than most level-access showers, and equipment such as a Mermaid Ranger can take up valuable circulation space in a smaller bathroom. The alternative of a ceiling hoist may be satisfactory for a minority of adults, but will not provide enough support for others or for a boy with DMD, unless used with a bath with an integral seat.

- If the person develops very severe knee and hip contractures and/or a spinal curvature, it may be difficult to sit in a comfortable and well-supported position on any other bath seat. The seat may have to be used higher in the water because the legs cannot be extended forwards and this means that more water is needed in the bath.
- A Mermaid Ranger (MD model) can be used to lift into and out of the bath. Although the chassis can be raised **32mm** to superimpose the seat over a shower toilet, the washing and drying action will not be as effective as it would be when sitting directly on the toilet seat. For this reason it is *not* recommended that a Mermaid Ranger and shower toilet are used together.
- Baths are considered to be less hygienic than a shower, particularly by many Asian people, and also use more water.
- Although some larger adults and older boys with DMD support themselves with the side of the bath, others may find a standard bath too constricting and need a corner bath with the installation of a ceiling hoist extending from the bedroom. However, in these cases, support in the bath must be considered and a Mermaid Ranger may be satisfactory.

## Level-access shower - Advantages

- Takes up less space than a bath, which is important where there is no alternative to using a small existing room.
- When sited adjacent to the toilet pan, the level-access area, provided it is truly level, can also be the transfer space needed at the side of the pan for positioning a wheelchair.
- When not in use, the shower area increases the circulation space in the bathroom.
- A shower may help maintain independence where the user is able to walk or propel a shower chair, but is unable to get in and out of a bath without help. This can be the most important reason for choosing a shower for those expecting to remain independent in the foreseeable future. Assessment of an electrical height-adjustable shower seat is recommended for anyone able to walk, but having difficulty getting up from the seat (see Chapter 8b).
- Showering is likely to be quicker than having a bath.
- Showers are considered more hygienic than baths, and more economical as they use much less water.
- When showering a child, you can get in with them and create a 'fun' time.
- People of some faiths, including Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, wash in running water.

## Level-access shower - Disadvantages

- Leaning over a waist-high shower screen can be difficult for a helper and reaching down to wash the bather's feet is impossible. The alternative may be a waist-high rail with a short shower curtain, but this will not keep water within the shower area as satisfactorily.
- People with neuromuscular conditions often complain of feeling cold in a shower, particularly if they are not independent and are unable to move under the spray.
- It is impossible to have a good soak and it is more difficult for a carer to wash the bottom of a bather who is sitting in a shower chair.
- Some older boys with DMD dislike the pressure of the water on their body.
- Some adults with muscular dystrophy may be able to wash independently in a bath, but unless the height of the shower seat can be adjusted electrically, they have difficulty in washing their feet in a shower.
- Some types of floor construction can make a level-access shower impossible and/or expensive to install.

## Personal preference

It is important that the individual person or the family make the choice, having had the opportunity to discuss all the issues involved.

## Long-term solutions

The difficulty with many neuromuscular conditions is that their progressive nature makes it not always possible to choose one method of bathing suitable in the long term. The ideal answer would be a bathroom large enough to accommodate both a bath *and* a level-access shower area. Although Housing Associations who provide purpose-built accommodation may choose this option, grants officers and community OTs may not agree that the space needed for dual installation is justifiable. However, it is worth noting that the *“purposes for which an application for a Disabled Facilities Grant must be approved”* include *“a room in which there is a bath or shower (or both)”*. See Chapter 12 *Funding*. An alternative is to ensure that the space allocated for the shower is sufficient to accommodate a bath in the future, and vice versa. Thus the option can be changed with an additional grant that is justified on the grounds of changing needs. Conversely, the practicality of installing a bath over a floor area prepared for a shower can be considered. If a shower is needed in the future, the only cost involved is that of removing the bath and either tiling the floor or installing a shower tray.

Readers will be aware of the difficulties of offering advice without knowing the personal preferences and circumstances of everyone involved. Feedback on any of the above would therefore be appreciated.