

# Choosing a Walk-in or Accessible Bathtub

*by Shari McDowell*

Buying an Accessible Bathtub is a major decision. It involves a substantial amount of money, and the inconvenience of a bathroom renovation. It is important to fully research the options before you make a decision.

There are four main areas to look at: product choices, the bather, installation and feature/benefit considerations.

- Part 1 Accessible product choices
- Part 2 Bather considerations
- Part 3 Installation considerations
- Part 4 Feature and Benefit considerations

## Part 1 Accessible Product Choices

### Accessories: Grab Bars, Lift Seats, Bath Benches

Bathroom Safety Accessories can help protect yourself and your family against falls.

### Solid Step Cote Non-slip Shower Kit

Non-slip coatings or shower mats. Try applying a product like Solid Step-Cote to turn any surface into a non-slip finish.



### Shower Curtain

A weighted shower curtain will keep water off the floor to prevent slips.



Invisia Towel Bar



Accent Grab Bar

### Grab Bars

Add grab bars or rails around the bathtub, shower and toilet. Some grab bars do double-duty as shampoo shelves, towel racks, soap dishes and toilet roll holders. When grab bars are installed properly, they'll help you balance as you stand or sit and give you something to hold on to if you do slip. Improperly installed grab bars, or regular towel bars are not safe and may pull out to the wall when weight is put on them.

### Raised Toilet

You should also consider a higher "comfort height" toilet or a toilet seat extender to get up safely and with less effort.

## Bath Transfer Seat



If you can no longer safely step over the bathtub edge, then you can use a bath transfer seat. Bath seats are relatively inexpensive, and can be taken with you when you move.

Cons are that you still need to lift your legs over the side of the bathtub and that you can only shower in the tub. Make sure the bath seat is very stable and that you can reach the shower controls. Many people have been injured by a seat that flips over or by slipping off when reaching for the water controls.

## Lift Seat

Another option is a lift seat for in your bathtub, these can be either hydraulic or electric. They do work well, but do not offer a deep soak, can be too-wide for some bathtubs and are very difficult to clean. These range from around \$1500-\$2000.00.

A handheld shower head can allow you to have a seated shower. Be sure to position the lift chair near the water controls to prevent accidental scalding.



Invacare Aquatec Lift Chair

## Tub-cut (door insert for your bathtub):

A tub cut is another option for bathroom safety. You cut a hole in the side out of your bathtub and put in a door that either stays open or is fitted with a removable doorway. This modification is permanent and when you move, you will need to replace the bathtub.



It needs to be used with a bath-seat as most who need a tub-cut cannot lift themselves out of the bathtub floor safely or with assistance.

Essentially, a tub-cut turns your bathtub into a low-threshold shower.

This is not an option for metal tubs due to the difficulty and noise of cutting the tub wall. Pricing with installation ranges from \$800-\$1500.00.

## Walk-in bathtubs



Escape Plus Walk-in tub installed with deck extension and custom tile.

Walk in bathtubs are bathtubs with a door and a seat. You open the door and step over the ledge, sit down on the seat, close the door and then fill the bathtub. Typically they replace an existing bathtub.

***Walk in bathtubs are great for people who want a seated bath with the option of a stand-up or seated shower, as well as people who are more comfortable in a seated position, vs a reclined bathing position.***

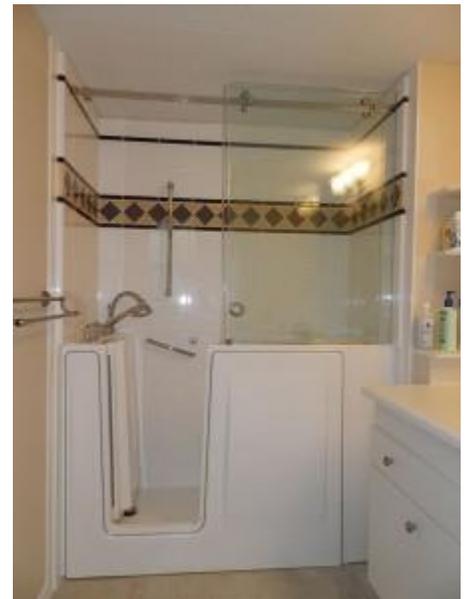
Disadvantages of walk-in tubs include that they take more time to fill and drain, that you need

to be able to walk to enter or exit the tub and that they take more water than a traditional bathtub, sometimes requiring a new hot water tank. They are also not suited for assisted bathing or for bathing young children.

Time to fill and drain walk-in tubs vary widely – from 5 minutes to 15 minutes or more to fill. Fill and drain time is dependent on the amount of water the tub takes, particularly how big the foot well is, the bathroom water pressure and size of supply lines and what fixtures are on the tub. When choosing a walk-in tub, consider fixture flow rate, drain size, and water capacity. ***Faster fill times make a big difference in product satisfaction.***

Things to look out for in walk-in tubs include:

- Knowing the size and height of the seat – the seat should be at least 17” high. Seat width and depth also has significant impact on comfort. Compare your favorite chair width and depth to the proposed walk-in tub seat. Make sure you will fit comfortably on the seat size.
- The tub will need to get through doorways and down hallways to get into your bathroom. Make sure that the doors are wide enough or that the door frames can be removed to make room for the tub width.



Liberty Walk-in bathtub with 3-wall surround and sliding glass doors for showering. This one also has custom colours.

Tubs typically range from 26" to 33" Make sure you measure this so they are no surprises. Narrower tubs may have narrower interior spaces, so this is a consideration also.

- Larger tubs take more water, so they take longer to fill and drain and you may need a hot water tank. Smaller tubs take less water, but may not have enough interior space for comfortable bathing.
- Warranty on the door is usually lifetime, but some only offer a 5 year warrant.
- The quality of the fixtures and hinges and the sub-frame will greatly affect the lifetime of the product and how it stands up to frequent use.
- Finishing options are also important, such as colour choices.

Walk-in bathtubs can be used with top-hung glass sliding doors, or with a shower curtain and rod for seated or stand-up showering.

### Barrier-free Showers



A barrier-free shower is a shower with either a low-threshold or no threshold so that you do not have to step over a lip to enter and exit the shower. Best-Bath Systems makes a wonderful line of shower systems and shower pans that are available in hundreds of models.

Roll-in shower pans have beveled thresholds or are recessed or used with a ramp so that wheelchairs, mobility aids and shower chairs can be rolled into the shower.



### Shower Seat

If not using a roll-in shower chair, then a shower seat is a great addition and is also the latest home design trend, especially in wood finishes.

## Shower Accessories:

The shower should be equipped with grab bars and any new shower installation should either have blocking built in or added behind the walls. In many areas, full blocking is now code to accommodate future secure attachment of grab bars and accessories.

Pay close attention to where the fixture controls in a shower are located. Consider installing on the back wall of the shower so that they are in easy reach of a seated person. Glide



bars and hand showers or multiple shower heads also accommodate bathers of different heights and abilities. Consider an anti-scald device or a temperature limiter to prevent accidental scalding.

Barrier-free showers can be used with a weighted shower curtain and flexible water-stopper, caregiver doors or attendant curtains, or with glass shower doors, either top-hung frameless, or framed with special guides and water stopper.

## Slide-in Bathtubs



Aquasure's Active Living (ADL) Spa Slide-in Bathtubs are full size bathtubs on a pedestal base with a sliding door in the side of the tub. The bather sits or transfers into the doorway, slides back in, closes the door, fills the tub with water and lays back and enjoys a deep soaker bath.

The Active Living Spa is at chair height for easy entrance for those using mobility aids like walkers or doing seat-to-seat transfers from a wheelchair, or a lift.

The advantages of a slide-in bath are that it offers a reclined deep-soak bath with less water than a walk-in bathtub and is accessible to people with a wider range of mobility challenges.

The raised up position makes it easier for caregivers to reach the bathers entire body, it is safe for bathing children (supervised only). It even has optional accessories like harnesses, seatbelts, thermostatic anti-scald fixtures and extender bars that make it easier to use for people with paralysis. The sliding door eliminates the clearance issues of a swing out or swing in door.





The Aquasure Active Living Spa is one of the only accessible bathtubs that are safe for children. Walk-in Bathtubs are not safe for children (see below) since children and frail people can fall into the foot-well.



***The Aquasure Active Living Spa is the fastest filling and draining accessible bathtub on the market! Less than 3 minutes to fill and 90 seconds to drain!***

The main disadvantage of the ADL Slide-in Bathtub is that it is ***not designed for stand-up showering***. So if you only have one fixture – a walk-in bathtub might be a better choice if you still want to shower standing up.

## Part 2: Bather Considerations

### *Is a walk-in tub right for you?*



Walk-in bathtubs require the bather to be able to walk to enter and exit the bathtub. If the bather has declining mobility or a high likelihood of needing assistance to bathe, then a walk-in bathtub might not be the right choice. A better choice might be a barrier-free shower or a slide-in bathtub, like the Aquassure Active Living Spa tub.

Again, it is important to note that the bather must be able to walk-unassisted and step over the threshold to use a walk-in bathtub. Walk-in tubs are not usable from wheelchairs or lifts.

### *Who will be using the bathtub?*

- Is it a couple using the tub or just one person?
- Is there another bathtub or shower in the house?
- Will there be children using the bathtub?
- Is there a guest bathroom with a shower and/or tub for overnight visitors?

If only one person will be using the tub, then you only have to consider their needs and preferences. If more than one person will be using the tub on a daily basis, then both people's needs and preferences need to be taken into account.

Ideally, there are at least two full bathrooms, so one bathroom can be made fully accessible and the other can have standard fixtures in it for other family members and guests to use.

### **Children:**



Children can fall into the foot-well area of walk-in bathtubs. It is not safe for children or non-ambulatory people to use walk-in tubs. Instead consider showers or the Active Living (ADL) Spa slide-in bathtub for guest use if there is only one bathroom.

### ***Is the bather a bath or a shower person or both?***

If the person (or persons) who will be using the tub/shower does not enjoy soaking in a bathtub, then a barrier-free shower is the best solution. We have a choice of curtains or sliding glass enclosures for showers and walk-in tubs.

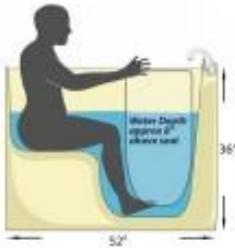


A shower doesn't let you soak in a tub. The Active Living (ADL) Spa allows seated, but not standing showers. These limitations may be the main deciding factor.

If two or more people will be using the tub, then a walk-in tub might be a good compromise – it provides a seated bath, seated shower and a stand-up shower. This choice and flexibility makes this a popular option.

If the bather (and others using the fixture) primarily want to soak in the bathtub, then a slide-in bath, such as the Active Living Spa (ADL) would be the best option.

### ***Bather's preferred bath position:***

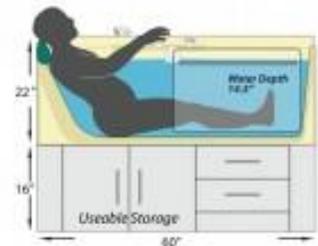


**Typical Walk-in Bath**

Some people are more comfortable reclined and others are more comfortable in a seated position with legs bent. Walk-in bathtubs and showers offer a seated bathing position.

Slide-in baths offer a reclined position with legs stretched out in front. The Active Living (ADL) Spa does not require legs to be bent to

enter and exit the bathtub. Seatbelts and shoulder supports can be used to prevent sliding forward for those with paralysis or poor trunk stability.



**Aquasure Bath System**

### ***Does the bather have health conditions that would benefit from soaking?***

The hydrostatic pressure of soaking in the bathtub helps reduce swelling (edema) and promotes circulation. There are many studies that show that increased circulation helps with immune response, better healing of bedsores, and overall health. As well, soaking helps to reduce spasticity, promoting sleep and reducing need for pain and sleep medication.

*“Spasticity is caused by an imbalance of signals from the central nervous system to the muscles. This imbalance is often found in people with cerebral palsy, traumatic brain injury, stroke, multiple sclerosis and spinal cord injury.”<sup>1</sup>*

One of the earliest Aquassure clients with the slide-in bathtub found that soaking in a bath every night reduced the pain of spasticity from stroke and that he slept better with less need for pain and sleep medication.

If spasticity is a concern, then choosing a walk-in or slide in bathtub is a better choice than a shower due to the benefits of immersion in water.

### ***Does the bather need assistance now or in the future?***



Walk-in bathtubs do not allow a caregiver to reach the bather's lower body and it is difficult to assist them in entering or exiting the bathtub. However, they can be installed with a 2-wall surround (depending on the bathroom layout) that allows the caregiver to access two sides of the tub for assistance with hair washing.



The Active Living Spa slide-in tub does facilitate full-body access. The bather is raised up for easy caregiver access. With a two-wall or peninsula installation, the caregiver can stand behind the bather for hair washing and to help with entry and exit. This bathtub is also lift-compatible bather getting help with hair-washing.

Roll-in showers allow use of rolling shower chairs or other mobility equipment for entry and exit. Use of caregiver doors or an assistance curtain lets the caregiver stand outside the shower while assisting the bather. This eliminates the need for the caregiver to have a shower with the bather.



1. <http://www.webmd.com/pain-management/pain-management-spasticity>

## Part 3 Installation considerations

### Installation:

Once you have decided that a walk-in tub is right for you, then it is time to evaluate which walk-in tub might fit and what features to consider.

### *How much space do you have?*

Showers will fit into very small spaces as little as 38" wide, but a walk in tub requires at least a 51" long space for a standard unit. Door and hallway widths are also a consideration: Walk-in tubs need at least a 26" doorway for the Liberty model, but slide-in bathtubs will fit through a 24" doorway. Some walk-in tub models require 32" or bigger doorways.

Aquasure's Active Living Spa fits through a 24" doorway because the cabinet base and tub are separate pieces. Other tubs like the Kohler Rising Wall tub or Best Bath's Big E require much more doorway and hallway clearance as they are one very large piece. These tubs are generally best for new construction only since the size of the tub makes them very difficult to move through doorways and down hallways.

Showers come in many different shapes and sizes and Best Bath Shower Systems come in 4-5 piece multi-piece systems to fit through doorways for easy renovations.

### Left vs. Right Door:

Look at where the tub will be installed. What is in front of the tub? If there is a toilet or counter in front of the tub, then the door needs to be on the other side for ease of access.

*Right Hand Door Opening:*



*Left Hand Door Opening:*



## Shower Surround

If you plan to use the walk-in tub to shower, then you will need some type of shower surround on the walls and a wall-mount glide bar for the shower head. The surround can be the original tile, a new tiled surround, a fiberglass 3-wall shower surround system, or an acrylic 3-wall surround system. You will also need a shower curtain or glass doors.

If you will not be showering in the walk-in tub, then you do not need a 3-wall shower surround, curtain, or doors. If there is room, whether you are showering or not, you may be able to add a deck extension on the end, or build a deck around the tub. An example of a deck extension can be seen on the Left Hand Door Opening tub photo on the right.

*Custom Tile Deck and Wall Surround*



## Water Usage

Walk-in tubs may use substantially more water than a regular bathtub. This is due to the large foot-well that fills first. Many tubs take 50-100 gallons to fill. You need to know how many gallons because there is no point in having a tub that you don't have enough water to fill. Make sure you know how much water the tub takes to fill and be prepared to upsize your hot water tank, if needed.

*Huntington Brass 3/4-inch Fixtures*



## Water Supply

Walk-in tubs can take several minutes to fill, depending on the water pressure, water supply line size and fixture choice. If you can, run 3/4" lines to the walk-in tub and choose 3/4" fixtures. This will make the most out of your flow rate.

## Electrical Supply

If you decide on a walk-in or slide-in bathtub, you will have the option of water or air hydrotherapy jets, and heated seats (standard on Best Bath Walk-in Tubs). These require electrical service in the tub area. Typically the electrical service needed is one or two 15 amp GFI circuits. It is difficult to provide this in some older houses with limited circuits available or if the electrical box is far from the bathroom. Most walk-in tubs have the option

of getting them without these features if electrical supply is not practical. Aquasure's Active Living Spa does not require power to operate the door, but some tubs do, so this should be a consideration for safety.

### **Drain Location:**

*Before – Fixtures and Drain on Left*



*After: Walk in and Slide-in Tubs support flexible drain and intake locations*



The Active Living Spa Slide-in tubs have clearance for the drain in the cabinet base. The drain can be anywhere under the bathtub. It is preferred that walk-in tubs have the drain on the same side as the door opening, but most can be installed with the drain location anywhere under the tub.

Showers have drain locations dictated by code. The drain location (left, right, center, etc.) will need to be matched to the shower pan and moved to match the pan, if needed. This can be difficult if the shower is on a concrete pad.

## Part 4: Features

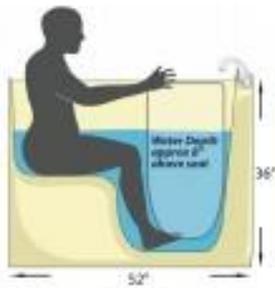
### Fill and Drain Time



Some walk-in tubs can take a long time to fill and drain. When you are wet, you might get cold waiting for the tub to drain. Make sure that your tub has fixtures that fill the tub quickly. Best Bath walk-in tubs will fill in under 6 minutes. Slide-in bathtubs like the Aquassure ADL Spa will fill in less than 3 minutes. Some other very popular walk-in tubs may take up to 15 minutes to fill.

Drain times range from 90 seconds to 5 minutes or more. 2" drains and multiple drains speed drain time

### Seat Size and Height.



Typical Walk-in Bath

Many walk-in tubs are not very large inside and need clearance for inward opening doors. Make sure that the seat is large enough for comfort and at least 17" high for easy use. Low seats are very hard to stand up from. Some manufacturers don't provide these measurements. Ask for these measurements in writing before you commit to buy.

### Outward vs. Inward Opening Door:



Outward opening doors need clearance for the door and mean that you need to move any assistance equipment, like walkers, out of the way to close the door. Outward opening doors can also burst open, flooding the bathroom and whatever is below it, if the bather fails to properly lock the door before filling.

Inward opening doors will not open accidentally, but require clearance to swing the door shut while the bather is standing the tub area. This can be accomplished by having a fold-up seat, like in the Liberty tub, or by changing the shape of the door and making the inside of the tub larger to clear the bathers knees. There is also an entrapment issue for inward opening doors. If the bather slips off the seat into the foot-well, then the door cannot be opened.

## Heated Seats

A way to make your tub more enjoyable is to have heated seats in the tub so you don't cool off while waiting for the tub to fill and drain. This is important in walk-in tubs because of the deep foot-well and extended fill and drain time. These are not needed in the Aquassure slide-in bath, as they fill and drain quickly.

## Fixtures:

It is important to have fixture sets that are safe to use.

Pressure balance valves set the mix of hot and cold water, but need to be readjusted every time you bath or shower and can have temperature fluctuations due to other household water demand.

Thermostatic limiters are pressure balance valves with an upper temperature limit control to prevent scalding.

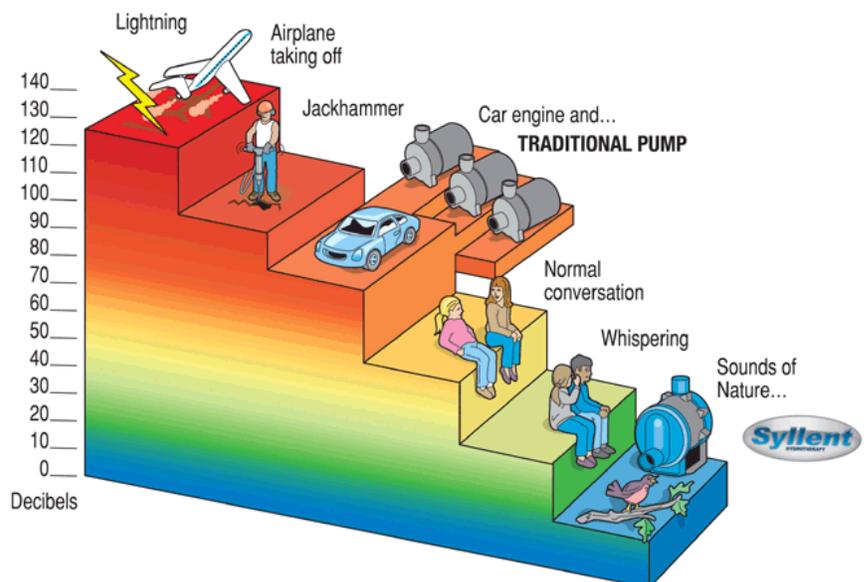
Thermostatic valves offer precise temperature control and anti-scald limits. This is important for those that cannot feel temperature changes due to paralysis, nerve damage or that have cognitive challenges that might make it easier to mix up the temperature controls.



3/4" high flow valves fill faster than 1/2" valves. High-flow fixtures 15 gallons or more per minute, standard fixtures fill at 6 gallons per minute. This makes a big difference in how fast your walk-in tub fills. Higher flow fixtures are worth the extra investment.

A hand-shower with a glide bar enables stand-up showering in a walk-in bathtub.

Comparison of Levels of Noise (dB)



## Water or Air Hydrotherapy Choices:

Water jets are stronger than air jets. Water jets need to be cleaned monthly and can harbour bacteria so you should get an automatic ozone disinfection system with water jet systems. Air jets do not need ozone. It is important that you ask

about whether the air blower or water jets are heated. If you blow cold air into the tub it will cool off quickly. And always ask about the sound levels of the water pump. Some pumps have the same sound levels as a jet taking off and others are extremely quiet. You may not be allowed to use a non-Syllent water pump in an apartment due to the loud fan noise.

## Shower Doors vs. Curtains

*Right door Liberty with wall surround, deck extension, curtain and towel rack.*



*Right door Liberty with wall surround, deck extension, curtain and towel rack.*



Curtains are less expensive than shower doors. For walk-in tubs, a corner rod will need to be used and the shower curtain will need to be shortened. Shower doors cannot be used on all models of tubs, and must be top-hung for walk-in bathtubs. Only some walk-in bathtubs have the right configuration and deck design to accommodate sliding glass doors. Rain-glass or clear glass is available. A straight rod with a shortened curtain can be used with the Aquassure slide-in bath.

## Colours

The standard walk-in bathtub colour is white. Most walk-in bathtubs are also available in a variety of stock colours such as bone, biscuit, and almond. Non-white toilets are more expensive than alternative colours, so it may be more economical to put in a white tub and put in a new white toilet to match.

Best Bath walk-in bathtubs are also available in a wide range of granite-look solid-surface and custom colours from red to black to grey for an additional cost. They are also available with tile-insets on the shower walls and colour accents on the shower wall surround.