

Universal Design Concepts

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Easy in...Easy out!

by Laurence Weinstein

Nothing can replace the tension reducing, muscle relaxing, and downright enjoyable results of taking a restful heated bath, especially with a whirlpool massage feature.

Many of us take bathing for granted. But some of us find it very difficult to step over the high sides of a bathtub and are denied these great benefits.

Walk-in bathtubs allow the user to easily enter and leave through a watertight door that swings open when the tub is empty of water and the door release lever is opened.

There are currently over 54 million Americans with some form of permanent disability and many millions more who incur an unexpected injury resulting in some form of physical mobility impairment. When we are healthy, we take for granted the simple action of being able to easily step up and over objects like climbing stairs, or taking a bath.

For those of us who have difficulty stepping over the side of a bathtub, the recent advent of "walk-in" bathtubs affords us the opportunity to enjoy the benefits of taking a soothing heated whirlpool bath. Soaking in a whirlpool bath is a great way to relieve aches and pains while also reducing stress, as the soothing hydrotherapy massage brings immediate relief to tight muscles and aching joints.

Regular bathtubs with their high sides make it difficult, or downright impossible, for anyone

who is mobility challenged to enter or leave the tub, especially older persons and people of all ages. Walk-in bathtubs allow the user to easily enter and leave through a watertight door that swings open when the tub is empty of water and the door release lever is opened.

There are presently a number of manufacturers offering this new innovative bathing aid.

However, as there are usually both well made and poorly made products of all kinds, there are also good, and not so good, walk-in bathtubs available.

In evaluating a number of different walk-in bathtubs, I found that the overall quality of construction varied between manufacturers from very good...to not so good! One manufacturer in particular had a great stainless steel sub-frame that assures long lasting strength, along with easy installation and leveling. Varying door sizes from different manufacturers allowed either easy, or sometimes difficult entry. Some had well designed simple to use latches that opened and closed easily, and some did not. Tub depths varied from different manufacturers, as did seat heights, quality of faucets, and other fittings.

Depending on the manufacturer and options selected, the cost range of the different tubs evaluated varied from as low as about \$4,500 to well over four times that amount for comparable units. I could not see any special benefits in material quality or options to justify this unreasonable price spread. A wise shopper should take the time and effort to check around to see what's available and carefully review the pros and cons of the many



different walk-in tubs available before making a final selection.

I was surprised to find that the one company who seems to have sold the greatest amount of these walk-in bathtubs thus far often sell their tubs at prices that are two to as much as four times higher than comparable units, and these tubs are not IAPMO Certified. The overall quality of these tubs is inferior to at least one of the other tub manufacturers who sell their competitive product for substantially less money.

As a professional industrial designer, architect, and builder with over four decades of experience, I found that only a few of the manufacturers seemed to have the all-important IAPMO Certification to assure the end user that the product is safe and meets plumbing standards.

I was also impressed that one particular walk-in tub offered the most benefits, as I found this manufacturer's walk-in tub to be one of the best overall tested and evaluated, based on overall construction utilizing a welded stainless steel structural

framework, high grade fiberglass composites, and great gelcoat finish. Product safety assurance excelled with the IAPMO Certification. The doorway was wide enough to allow easy entry and the ergonomic lever assures ease of use. I found the heated hydrotherapy feature worked great. Their installation crew was experienced, courteous, and efficient. Best of all...their tub comes with a lifetime limited warranty and their selling price was among the lowest of all tubs evaluated!

Laurence Weinstein has four decades of successful practice as a product designer, architect, contractor and educator. He is the developer/coordinator of the AARP National Events Livable Homes Pavilion and president of Shared Solutions America, a national nonprofit organization and technology Resource Center specializing in Livable homes to meet the needs of 78 million boomers and their aging parents, and people of all ages with disabilities.