

Wheelchair Seating and Mobility Devices (WSMD)

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Fact Sheet

A wheelchair is an assistive device used to optimize how a person sits and moves in their environment.¹ Wheelchairs are used by approximately 5.5% of adults and children in the United States. A wheelchair can improve the quality of a person's life by allowing for an improved ability to participate in activities at home and in the community.¹

The purpose of wheelchairs is to provide:

- safe and efficient mobility in a person's particular environment
- postural support and stability

There are many decisions to be made in selecting the optimal wheelchair. Consideration of the following items can contribute to the best choice for you.¹ If a person has difficulty controlling and balancing their trunk, a seating system that ranges from simple seat cushions and safety belts to customized inserts can be considered. Advanced technology for wheelchairs can include motorized propulsion driven by voice, mouth or other body parts for control.

Medical diagnosis and expected progression or worsening of symptoms are considered when selecting a wheelchair. Typically, selection decisions are made based on a person's needs assessment completed by a team of individuals including: you, family members, caregivers, your primary or specialized healthcare provider (the prescriber), a physical therapist or occupational therapist, and a wheelchair supplier specialist. Depending on availability, you may be able to participate in a wheelchair clinic for this initial assessment. Most recently, telehealth services have begun for remote assessment of wheelchair and seating needs.^{2,3}

Steps to attaining a wheelchair⁴:

1. **Prescription:** a document from your primary healthcare provider recommending a wheelchair
2. **Assessment:** a process where examination of your body and determination of your needs are considered to formulate a plan for choosing a wheelchair
3. **Selection/Design:** selection of particular features like type and size of wheelchair
4. **Submission/Approval:** Your team submits a letter of medical necessity to your insurance company, which is reviewed for coverage
5. **Funding/Cost:** talk with your insurance about your benefits and confirm final out-of-pocket cost
6. **Fitting:** to ensure the wheelchair fits you correctly
7. **Training:** specific training to ensure you can propel/maneuver the wheelchair at home and in the community.

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Pictured below are common types of wheelchairs:



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A transport wheelchair is a lightweight wheelchair that can be used when transporting to doctor's visits or other trips in the community. It folds easily and can fit in most car trunks. It has four small wheels, making it easier for a caregiver to push. A person can propel it independently only with their legs.

Pros: Lightweight, can be transported in a vehicle

Cons: The user has limited ability to propel, minimal seating support



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A manual wheelchair is often covered by insurance. A physician's order is typically required to receive a manual wheelchair. This chair has a sling seat, 2 large rear wheels that allow it to be propelled by the user, 2 front caster wheels that swivel, removable arm and leg rests, and wheel locks. It can also be folded to store in a car trunk, but it is heavier than a transport chair. A manual wheelchair can be customized to be lightweight or ultra-lightweight, offer different types of leg and foot support and have postural support.

In later stages of disease, propelling a manual wheelchair or driving a power mobility device may not be possible. When the primary goal of a wheelchair is for postural support a customized manual wheelchair with a tilt in space feature is the best selection. The tilt in space feature allows the caregiver to safely provide pressure relief to prevent pressure injuries.

Pros: User can propel, can be transported in vehicle

Cons: Minimal seating support, heavier than transport chair

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