Choosing a comfortable chair

Choosing a comfortable, supportive and functional chair requires careful consideration of your needs, preferences and the intended use of the chair. You may require a chair with a specific design feature. Before buying a chair you should test it for comfort by sitting in it for a minimum of ten minutes. Check whether the chair can be customised in size, and that it has design features which make it suitable for you.

For older people or people with a disability, chairs can be uncomfortable or unsupportive and it can become difficult to stand up from some chairs. We get into and out of chairs many times a day so if you are having difficulties you may be able to overcome them by adapting your chair, or changing the way you sit down on or stand up from the chair.

If you have difficulty getting into and out of a chair, contact ILC Tas 1300 885 886 to speak to an Occupational Therapist about sit-to-stand techniques and/or your chair options.

There is a wide range of chairs on display at ILC Tas.

Tips for standing up from a chair

Move your bottom to the front edge of the chair

- Place your feet hip or shoulder-width apart (both feet flat on the floor, heels back against the front of the chair)
- Bend forward at the hips, and as you stand, look ahead with your 'nose over your toes'
- Get up slowly, pushing up from the arm rests or the seat, keeping your bodyweight over your feet and using the big muscles in your legs to stand up

Further advice

- Try to sit in chairs with arm rests on both sides, and avoid low chairs
- Wear supportive footwear with slip-resistant soles
- As blood pressure can fluctuate when you change your posture, such as from lying to sitting or from sitting to standing, avoid dizziness by waiting for a few minutes before standing up and moving away from the chair

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Features to consider when buying a chair

Seat height: When you are seated your hips should be level with, or just above, the height of your knees, and your feet should be flat on the floor. If in doubt, talk to a qualified health professional. Correct seat height is important to allow you to sit down and stand up as easily as possible.

Seat firmness: The foam in the seat should be firm enough to make getting up easy and support good posture, yet still be comfortable. Some manufacturers will customise foam type, size and density on chairs which have zippered cushions in the back rest. Some chairs feature air bags or water bladders that assist with reducing pressure and increasing comfort.

Seat depth: The seat should support the length of the buttocks and thighs. The front edge of the seat should curve downwards ending two to three finger-widths behind the knees to avoid putting pressure on the muscles, nerves and blood vessels in the lower leg. If the seat depth is too long this may cause you to slip forward, particularly when straightening your knees so that your feet can reach the floor. This will affect your posture and your ability to get out of the chair.

Seat width: Seat width should allow enough space on either side of your body for the width of two to three fingers, but close enough for the arm rests to remain comfortable.

Back rest: There is a wide variety of back rest styles. The back rest should support the natural curves of the spine. A lounge chair back rest should also provide support for the head and neck. A small cushion or lumbar roll may help if extra support and comfort are required.

Arm rests: In a lounge chair, your forearms should rest on the arm rests at about 90 degrees without hunching of your shoulders, and be firm to assist you to push up to a standing position. If sitting up to a table, your arms should rest on the work surface at about 90 degrees. Make sure the length of the arm rests and height of a dining chair enable the chair to be moved close to the table. Padded arm rests may be more comfortable. Avoid using chairs where the arm rests are located outside the seat of the chair and not above the chair legs.

Fabric: The choice of fabrics available includes vinyl, leather, stretch material and wool. Moisture-resistant covering is available for some chairs.

Load capacity: Load capacity is the maximum occupant-weight recommended by the manufacturer for a product. It varies between chairs. It is important for the occupant's safety that their weight is not greater than the load capacity. Lounge and dining chairs with higher load capacities are available. Load capacity may also be written as SWL or load test. A kilogram (kg) weight is then provided.

Things to Consider

- In which room will you use the chair? What is the purpose of the chair?
- Will you be sitting in the chair at a table? Can you get the chair close enough to the table? Can you push the chair into and away from the table on your own?
- Do you want to be able to sit with the back rest upright, but the leg rest up?
- Do you have a small space? Consider a chair with the wall saver feature.
- Can you easily operate the controller? How close is the chair to a power outlet?
- Does an electric lift chair have battery backup in case of a power outage?
- Is there adequate space for your elbows if you are reading a book or knitting?

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Lounge chair or dining chair?

A lounge chair is usually designed to allow you to relax or do activities such as reading, watching television or talking to others. Some lounge chairs recline manually and others have electric lift and recline operation.

Dining chairs are generally designed for eating, drinking, and other tabletop activities. The seat base is normally level and there are height-adjustment options if they are needed. These chairs may be called bridge or hip replacement chairs. They have padded seating and supportive back rests. Arm rests are often padded and will help you to get up and down.

Although not height-adjustable, there is a chair that has a swivel-slide seat mechanism. It allows easy access to the chair and will enable you to move close to the table edge without moving the legs of the chair.

Height-adjustable chairs

A chair with height-adjustable legs can alter the height of the seat to suit your size so that your feet are flat on the floor, and your hips level with, or a little higher than, your knees. These chairs are available with a low back or a high back. You can adjust the back rest angle of some high back height-adjustable chairs. Some chairs have back rests which can be set at different positions to allow seat depth to be altered. Separate height-adjustable leg rests are available for use with these chairs. However, consider your balance when having one of these in place. If you cannot move the leg rest either away from the chair or into place safely it becomes a possible trip hazard.

Manual recliner chairs

A recliner lounge chair has a back rest that can be angled backwards, and a leg rest that moves up to alter your position. The usual way to operate the mechanism is by pushing backwards against the back rest and pushing forwards on the arm rests. These recliners usually have a built-in leg rest. To operate this mechanism you need to have good trunk and arm strength. You also need to have good leg strength to push the leg rest into place when wanting to get out of the chair. Some chairs have a lever or handle operating mechanism. This requires you to have balance for leaning to the side, and strength in your hands to pull the lever or to push your body forcefully against the back rest.

Electric lift and recline chairs

This type of chair can be reclined and the leg rest raised, or the seat can be tilted forward to help you stand up. Electric lift and recline chairs are operated using a hand-held controller with buttons or toggle switches.

The leg rest in a chair with a **single motor** moves upwards when the back rest tilts backwards. In some chairs, the leg rest moves up as the back rest is reclining. With others, the leg rest moves up before the back rest starts to recline. Recline position differs between chairs, some lying back more than others. Some chairs have a 'wall saver' mechanism, whereby the entire seat glides forward as the back rest reclines, to prevent the back of the chair from striking the wall or furniture behind the chair.

A chair with **two motors** allows independent control of back rest and leg rest movements. The extra buttons on the controller may be more confusing to operate than on the one motor controller. Some two motor chairs lie completely flat creating a comfortable resting and sleeping position. It is advisable to use the leg rest when reclining the back rest to raise and support the legs and to avoid strain on the lower back.

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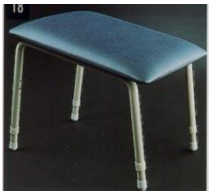
Electric lift chairs plug into standard household power outlets. Most chairs have battery backup in the transformer or in the hand control. In the event of a power failure, the battery backup will usually provide enough power to lift the chair once. ILC Tas recommends that you test this feature. The batteries should then be replaced.

Adapting a fixed-height chair

Increase the height of your chair

Chair-raising blocks can be placed under the four legs to raise the chair. A chair raised on blocks should be safe for you to use. Landing heavily onto a raised chair is not safe, and nor is using bricks or blocks of wood to raise a chair as it can slip off them.
A platform placed under all four legs can also raise the chair height. It is recommended that the chair does not rock or recline when chair blocks or a chair platform is used, to ensure stability of the chair. The platform should not prevent you from getting your toes under your knees when rising as this will make it difficult for you to stand.
Assessment by a qualified health professional is recommended, to determine your correct seat height, and to specify which chair-raising solution is safe for you, and appropriate for your chair.

Add a foot rest or leg rest



Your feet should be flat on the floor when you are seated. If you would like to put your feet up consider adding a leg rest or ottoman, which will support your feet and lower legs. A foot rest or leg rest should be easy to move out of your way so that you are not leaning over it when trying to get off the chair.

Use a portable cushion

A hydraulic portable lifting cushion can assist you to stand and it can be placed onto a variety of standard chairs. It is highly recommended that you trial this device and have a full demonstration of its setup and use. Your ability to use the cushion safely needs to be established. You need to be able to initiate the movement into a standing position, and then you are 'boosted' up by the cushion. However, as you rise, the arm rests become less effective in assisting with standing as it is likely the cushion will be higher than the arm rests. You need to have good balance and stability when using these cushions as they can be unstable on a padded seat. The weight-setting of this type of cushion needs to be adjusted for you. These cushions are heavy to carry, can be difficult to set up correctly on chair seats, and you need to take care not to catch your fingers in the operating mechanism.

A portable cushion or pad placed on top of a chair seat will increase the seat height. However the arm rests will not be raised in height and they may not be effective in providing support.

Contact ILC Tas for more information

Ring **1300 885 886** to speak to a health professional

Visit our website www.ilctas.asn.au or email us at ilc@ilctas.asn.au

Make an appointment to visit our centre at **275 Wellington Street, South Launceston**

Ring us to find out when we will be visiting your area

ILC Tas is a not-for-profit organisation and does not sell equipment.

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