



Choosing a wheelchair

Many people need a wheelchair to manage either daily mobility at home or to travel longer distances in the community. This information sheet covers some of the factors to consider when choosing the right wheelchair for your needs. Speak to an occupational therapist about the types of wheelchairs and options available, or contact ILC Tas on 1300 885 886 for more information.

Things to consider:

- Your needs - where will you use the wheelchair, will someone assist you, is it for short or long term use?
- Your body - your height and weight.
- Any special requirements - customised seating, pressure or discomfort relieving products, positioning supports?
- What type of wheelchair will suit you - manual or powered, self-propelled or push chair?
- How will you transport the wheelchair?
- Cost – there is quite a price range to consider. Is there a funding scheme to assist you?

Manual or powered wheelchair

A manual wheelchair requires the user, or an assistant, to push it. This may be easy to do on flat terrain or indoors, but more difficult on rough or sloped terrain. However, manual wheelchairs are considerably cheaper than most powered wheelchairs, and most can be folded for transport.

Powered wheelchairs are battery powered, and usually have a joystick to control speed and other functions. They require more maintenance, including regular battery charging, and may require other transport options such as a van, station wagon, or maxi taxi.



Self-propelled or push wheelchair

A 'self-propelled' wheelchair has large rear wheels and small front wheels, allowing you to push yourself, while a 'push' or 'transit' wheelchair has four smaller wheels, and you need an assistant to push you.



'Self-propelled'



Transit or 'push' wheelchair

Folding or non-folding wheelchair

Many manual wheelchairs and some powered wheelchairs can be folded for transport and storage. Many wheelchairs have components that can be dismantled. On a manual wheelchair, for example, large rear wheels, armrests and footplates can usually be removed. However, even when powered wheelchairs are dismantled, they still have heavy components to lift, such as the batteries and the main wheelchair frame.

Generally, a non-folding or 'rigid frame' wheelchair will be stronger, with fewer moving parts and a fixed or 'rigid' frame. This may be important if the wheelchair is used for sport, on rough terrain, or if the user is heavy or very active. You will need to consider how you will transport a non-folding wheelchair.

Things to consider:

- Load capacity is the maximum occupant-weight recommended by the manufacturer for a product. It varies between wheelchairs. It is important for the occupant's safety that their weight is not greater than the stated load capacity of the wheelchair.

Standard or customised features

Many standard manual wheelchairs are supplied with a range of standard features such as:

- manually operated brakes
- removable, swing away footplate 'hangers'
- height-adjustable footplates
- height-adjustable armrests
- removable rear wheels
- small front wheels ('casters')
- push rims
- push handles



'Standard' wheelchairs are usually available in only standard sizes with standard features, so for some people (e.g. very tall), a customised wheelchair may be necessary. An occupational therapist can provide advice in this area or refer you to professionals, with specialist experience in this area, who can measure up for your custom-built wheelchair. A correctly fitting wheelchair will be more comfortable for you.

Things to consider:

- Strengthened wheelchairs are available for heavier users, providing reinforced frames (e.g. folding wheelchairs with double cross bars under the seat) or non-folding frames which are recommended for extra strength. Seats and backrests can also be reinforced, upon request.

Lightweight or ultra-lightweight manual wheelchairs are available, but tend to be more expensive due to materials used in construction (e.g. titanium). They are measured for and custom-built to suit the individual user. This type of wheelchair is recommended for independent and active wheelchair users.



Getting the right wheelchair for you

Please consider getting assistance in choosing a manual wheelchair. Occupational therapists and some other allied health professionals, along with suppliers, can help guide your selection. There are also specialist wheelchair and seating assessment services available if needed.



Things to consider:

- Seat height – when seated, your knees should be level with your hips, not raised above them.
- Seat depth – your thighs should be fully supported on the seat to help evenly distribute your weight. You should allow two or three finger-widths space behind the knees to the front seat edge. If the seat depth is too long, this may cause you to slip forward in the seat.
- Seat width – the seat should fit you comfortably and allow enough space for your hips, without your hips sitting on the seat rails.
- Backrest height – ensure that the back supports you according to your needs: width, height and shape.
- Armrest height – should be adjustable to fit you comfortably and provide support.
- Headrest – essential if you travel in a van or maxi taxi in your wheelchair.
- Footplates – should be adjustable to comfortably suit your leg length and support your feet. Ensure that there is enough footplate clearance from the ground.
- Handbrakes – essential for safety, or when stopping on slopes.
- Seatbelt or harness - to assist positioning, and for safety if there is risk of you falling out.

Manual wheelchairs may have a range of other options such as fold-down backrest, reclining backrest, 'desk' arms, larger front castors for outdoor use, amputee leg support, elevating leg rests, solid or 'thorn proof' tyres, cane/crutch holder, cup holder, heel loops, calf straps, padded seat, clothing protectors.

As a general rule, cheaper wheelchairs will have fewer options or accessories available.

Powered wheelchairs may have a range of powered or manual options such as reclining backrest, powered seat elevation, seat/back tilt in space, and elevating leg rests. Powered wheelchairs can be operated directly by the client, or by an 'attendant controller' – a controller located on the back of the wheelchair for a carer to operate. There are also other specialised options available, such as wheelchairs that allow the user to stand up.

Comfort

For older people or people with a disability, wheelchairs can be uncomfortable or unsupportive. Wheelchair cushions can assist by reducing pressure and increasing comfort. There are many types available, and you may need guidance to find a wheelchair cushion to meet your needs.

Things to consider:

- Having a cushion for your wheelchair is recommended and needs to be considered in the set up of the wheelchair. The height of the cushion will affect features like backrest height, armrest and footplate position, in providing the required support.

Travelling in your wheelchair in a vehicle

Things to consider:

- A headrest is essential (can be removable).
- You will need a wheelchair seatbelt (e.g. hip belt or harness), vehicle seatbelt system like a normal car seatbelt, and a wheelchair 'tie down' system
- Ramp access to vehicle - can be manual or electric/mechanical ramp.
- The safer option is to transfer into a normal car seat, if this is possible.
- There are vehicles available that allow people in wheelchairs to sit in any location, even to drive.

Transporting your wheelchair

Ask your supplier to demonstrate how to dismantle and reassemble your wheelchair. Parts can be dismantled on most manual wheelchairs. There is equipment available that can assist you in transporting your wheelchair without excessive lifting. However, power wheelchairs may require a van or station wagon with ramps, a wheelchair trailer or maxi taxi for transport, due to their weight.



For more information, contact ILC Tas on 1300 885 886 to speak to an occupational therapist.

Warranty and maintenance

Wheelchair suppliers provide a limited warranty on their products. We recommend you check this at time of purchase, including conditions (e.g. cost of freight for repairs) and the cost of any additional accessories. Batteries may have very limited warranty, and tyres usually have none. A guide to recommended maintenance should be supplied, including information about cleaning, battery charging, recommended use, and tyre and battery replacement.

Also see ILC Tas Information sheet: Maintaining your wheelchair and cushion

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

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