



Choosing a Wheelchair

Many people need a wheelchair to manage either daily mobility at home or to travel longer distances in the community. This booklet covers some of the factors to consider when choosing the right wheelchair for your needs.



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Launceston, Hobart, Ulverstone

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

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

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.



Folding or non-folding

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. 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.



Wheelchair features

‘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 with specialist experience in this area can measure for a custom-built wheelchair. A correctly fitting wheelchair will be more comfortable.

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.



Strengthened wheelchairs are available for bariatric users, providing reinforced frames or non-folding frames 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). This type of wheelchair is recommended for independent and active wheelchair users.

Standard features

Seat height – when seated, your knees should be level with your hips.

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.

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 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. Most are removable and can swing away for easier transfers.

Brakes – manually operated essential for safety, or when stopping on slopes. Brakes can also be used by an assistant in certain wheelchairs.

Seatbelt or harness – to assist positioning, and for safety if there is risk of you falling out particularly in vehicles.

Wheels – most manual wheelchairs have the option for the rear wheel to be removed. Front ‘castor’ wheels should support stability over uneven terrain.

Handrim – different materials, shape, diameters and spacing can impact the efficiency to propel in a wheelchair and reduce long-term injury.

Customised features

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.



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.

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



Cushions

For older people or people that require a wheelchair for long use, wheelchairs can be uncomfortable or unsupportive. Wheelchair cushions can assist by reducing pressure and increasing comfort. It is recommended that choosing a cushion is considered in the setup of the wheelchair as it will impact the features like backrest height, armrest and footplate position. There are many types of cushions available, guidance from an Occupational Therapist to find a wheelchair cushion to meet your needs may be beneficial.



Travelling in a car in a wheelchair

There are vehicles available that allow people in wheelchairs to sit in any location, even to drive. The safer option is to transfer into a normal car seat if this is possible as a car seat and belt is specifically designed to keep a passenger as safe in movement.

Using your wheelchair as a passenger seat, you will require:

- A headrest (can be removable after transportation).
- A wheelchair seatbelt (e.g. hip belt or harness), vehicle seatbelt system like a normal car seatbelt, and a wheelchair 'tie down' system
- Access into vehicle – i.e. a manual or electric/mechanical ramp.



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.



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.



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- o Ring 1300 885 886 to speak to a health professional.
- o Visit our website www.ilct.com.au or email ilc@ilct.com.au.
- o Make an appointment to visit one of the displays centers:
Launceston, Hobart, or Ulverstone.
- o ILCT visits communities around Tasmania. Contact us to
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