

## **Tips to consider when looking for your perfect wheelchair** *(A consumer's perspective)*

Everyone is different and has different needs – no one chair fits all.

A wheelchair needs to be considered as part of an overall transportation plan – chair needs to fit van, van needs to fit garage, chair needs to fit house.

Wheelchair needs to carry weight of person but should otherwise be as small as possible. This helps in the house, in elevators and generally in getting around (many BIG chairs are on the market but are often impractical).

Wheelchair versus scooter? Be sure to explore all your options – a three-wheeled scooter may be dangerous as they can tip easily.

A wheelchair van with a side ramp needs a double car garage. If available, a three-car garage allows for more room.

Seating is critical – you may need a special cushion (perhaps a Roho<sup>®</sup>) to prevent pressure sores. Try adding a natural sheepskin to help keep you dry and comfortable.

Key measurements: bottom of foot to back of knee (leg should be at 90 degrees), back of knee to back of seat, height of armrests.

Armrests are a critical part - right height, long enough, wide enough, padded, folding up or removable needed?

Ask for tie-down brackets on the chair. You may not use them day-to-day but they are important to have when you do need them (for example, when traveling in an accessible bus).

A headrest is a critical component to consider especially if your neck muscles are weak or if you have a tilt feature on your chair.

Three big options to think about adding to your chair: stand-up seat (brings you to a vertical position), reclining seat (back goes down leaving feet on the floor), tilting seat (whole seat tilts back bringing the feet up and leaving hips at 90 degrees). The tilt option can reduce complications of edema (swelling) in the feet and legs. A seat that simply goes up and down may not be as helpful in some cases as a stand-up seat. A stand-up chair also allows you to reposition yourself and air out your seat every so often – again important in maintaining skin integrity and preventing pressure sores.

The stand up seat requires a knee brace to hold your legs in place (people mistakenly think the chair stands them up and they can then just step away from it).

Plan ahead to coordinate furniture locations (where is the bed going to be?), with space requirements for the chair and an overhead track system. Adopt a layout that will easily allow addition of a track system when necessary.

A central footplate may be more appropriate. They fold up easily. Individual footrests can be heavy and cumbersome.

A manual chair to back up or supplement your electric wheelchair is often suggested to assist with your transportation needs. The cost may be partly covered by a health care plan. If not, a used manual chair is an option to consider.

If you need repairs to your primary chair, the dealer usually supplies a "loaner" power chair.

Chair seat belts need to be long enough to give lots of slack – factor in a winter coat. A chest belt is also an option.

Choose very large clothing to wear in a chair, the looser the better, to avoid bunching and pinching.

Do not reach down to pick things up, as the risk of falling out of the chair is significant.

Power chairs are powerful and can be tricky to use at first (visualize driving a garden tractor around your house). You must ensure there is a barrier at the top of any stairs and use caution in approaching curbs as you can fall off or tip over.

Always carry a phone on the chair if possible.

The bathroom and the bedroom must be large enough to accommodate your new wheelchair.