

Lifestage Transition: Making the Move to Medical Mobility

A Guide to Wheelchair Provision

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Are you facing the transition to a wheelchair and wish you had an explanation of the step-by-step processes? You may be wondering: “How do I start – what are the steps ahead of me – and how will I manage, how will I learn to drive this machine?” This article will hopefully help you with an easy to understand overview of what’s ahead. Your local ATP will be your main resource and informed partner in the process.

Introduction

Today's wheelchair technology can perform seeming miracles, helping people with disabilities maintain high levels of activity and social engagement. But transitioning to a wheelchair may be daunting. You may feel worried about the impending change in your life, even as you are discovering the tremendous capacity of the power chair to restore a high level of mobility. Whatever you are facing, your ATP will be a valuable resource to advise, support and assist you in this process.

While the regulations, the healthcare insurance issues and the technology may all be new territory, you can be assured that learning to use a wheelchair is a success story. Today's power chairs provide freedom ... freedom to move, freedom from discomfort, freedom to live your life the way you want.

1. Starting the Process: The Mobility Exam

Please understand from the outset that acquiring a new wheelchair is a time-consuming process. It typically takes from three to six months, because the chair is so highly customized. The process requires the expertise of several medical professionals, insurance approvals, the ordering of special parts, and the final phase of assembly and custom fitting. But the wait is worth it – at the end, you will have a chair that fully responds to your physical needs and lifestyle.

The process starts when you and your family, your doctor or therapist, recognize the need for a power chair to support and maintain mobility. Then you need to see a physician specifically, and only, for a mobility exam. The exam cannot be combined with any other type of medical visit or claim. This is essential for insurance purposes, especially if you hope to receive Medicare coverage.

During the mobility exam, the physician documents your mobility needs in the medical record ... writes a prescription for mobility equipment ... and a referral for the next step: evaluation by an Occupational or Physical Therapist.



2. The Therapeutic Evaluation

Your family members or caregiver are welcome to attend the therapy exam. Some therapy practices may have a formal “Seating Clinic” where this exam takes place.

A skilled therapist will assess your unique physical requirements and recommend the most appropriate mobility technology. Specifications will include mechanisms for controlling the chair and specific types of seating and positioning products. The ATP will typically also participate in this process.

The chair must accommodate all of your requirements, not only for mobility but also for comfort, including customization to accommodate any special needs. It must also have appropriate control instruments for your medical condition. If you are unable to operate a standard joystick, you have the options of a headrest control, breath control or other drive systems. These state-of-the-art technologies are continually advancing to enhance smooth drive and ease-of use.

Your comfort is of course a major concern. Seating and positioning, including seat cushions and legrests, will be carefully specified around your measurements. If needed, corrective seating can help stabilize the upper body and thus actually improve posture. Appropriate seating also helps optimize your control of the wheelchair.

The therapist and ATP will also help you determine whether a front wheel, rear wheel or mid-wheel drive system is most appropriate for your medical needs and anticipated usage.

The therapist must demonstrate to the insurer’s satisfaction through medical documentation that a lesser level of mobility technology will not fully support your needs.

3. The Home Assessment

Next comes the home assessment. Most insurance providers specify that the chair must be primarily for use in the home. It must fit through your doorways and hallways, with space to maneuver turns. The home evaluation is often performed by an ATP, who works for the wheelchair supplier.

If you are already using other medical equipment such as oxygen, etc., you may wish to order your wheelchair from your existing supplier. If not, the doctor or therapist can recommend a wheelchair supplier with whom you can work in confidence.



Within the same insurance documentation, the ATP will provide recommendations for any necessary home modifications such as widening doors or building ramps, to show that the power chair is appropriate for home use. Your supplier will continue to provide future maintenance or modifications to the chair should your physical conditions change.

4. Financial Considerations

Wheelchairs are complex medical equipment, and can be costly, with costs rising commensurate with level of technology and customization. It is important for you to know in advance what is and is not covered by your health insurance.

If the recommended chair is not fully covered, the ATP can help you determine the financial impact; decide what you can afford out of pocket; and explore other sources for funding. Medical societies (such as ALS and Muscular Dystrophy) and local organizations may provide assistance. Some states also provide vocational rehab funding to help people with disabilities get back to work.

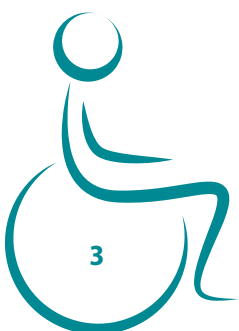
5. Itemized Costs and Authorization

Once payment options have been reviewed, the equipment provider will generate detailed quotes. The order will list all the specified, customized parts with itemized costs. This order will be signed by the doctor and submitted to your health insurance carrier for approval.

Some Medicaid providers require prior authorization for payment. Medicare usually does not. The ATP will help with any necessary pre-authorizations, and with additional documentation the insurer may require. While this may add some time to the process, it is an essential step to secure insurance coverage.

6. Completing the Order

With approvals in place, the equipment provider will complete the order ... receive the parts ... and assemble the chair with all specified customization including seating components and specialty controls. Like customizing a car, this quality-controlled process can take several days.



7. Delivery

Once the chair is assembled and meets the prescription criteria it can be delivered directly to the home, or to the rehabilitation facility, per your preference.

Your ATP or rehab technician will accompany delivery, assist the patient in learning how to safely use the chair and make any necessary final adjustments. Ideally, your occupational Therapist or Physical Therapist will also be involved. Upon completing delivery, paperwork is finalized.

After this delivery and training session, the power chair should be perfectly attuned to your comfort, posture and driving technique.

8. Follow-Up Visit

To assure your total comfort, if necessary, the ATP or rehab technician will return for a house call. These follow-up visits usually take place 4-6 weeks after delivery. This allows time for you to assess the chair's performance in various environments and decide if any adjustments would be helpful. You may want the angle of the back adjusted for comfort, or the height changed, or the drive system fine-tuned for your particular driving style. The ATP or rehab technician will adjust as requested to make the power chair your perfect partner for medical mobility.

9. Back in Action

That's the basic process of transitioning to a power chair. Yes, it takes time – but it's worth it. The right power chair helps you accomplish not only what you need to do, but also what you want to do. You can achieve a fulfilling level of mobility, enjoy social interactions, commute to work, ... participate in the world and get your life back.

10. Frequent Questions & Answers

Can my family doctor help me attain my wheelchair or do I need to see a specialist?

Start by discussing your needs with your family doctor and if necessary, he/she will refer you to a specialist (such as a neurologist or physical medicine & rehabilitation specialist). An Occupational Therapist or Physical Therapist specializing in seating and mobility should also be consulted, usually by referral of your family doctor.



How do I find a mobility chair provider?

If you are currently receiving medical supplies, such as oxygen or diabetic supplies, your current provider may be able to help. If you are not, your doctor or therapist can usually recommend a supplier.

How do I find an Assistive Technology Professional (ATP)?

Most wheelchair providers have an ATP on staff. It is best to work with a mobility chair provider with an ATP in order to get the best service. If you are unable to locate an ATP, check the Rehabilitation Engineering and Assistive Technology Society of North America website at: http://resna.org/member_directory/individual/index.dot



Should I contact the wheelchair manufacturer?

No. You can educate yourself on the available wheelchairs via the web. But, your primary contact is not directly with the manufacturer. Your wheelchair provider will handle the ordering, specification and communication on your behalf.

This article was prepared as a public service by Curtis Instruments, Inc.

This information reflects procedures the U.S. market. Requirements may be different in other countries. Patients should confer with their medical team and equipment provider to be in full compliance with regulations.

Please see the supporting video to this article, with helpful and heartfelt user peer advice from a new wheelchair user who just recently completed the process of transitioning into a rehab chair. Mr. Conway Policastro explains in his own words how he overcame his apprehensions to find a new sense of emancipation and freedom in his new wheelchair.

Go to : <http://tinyurl.com/WheelchairTransition>

About Curtis

Curtis Instruments, Inc. does not build wheelchairs or power chairs and does not market products to wheelchair users. Curtis designs and manufactures advanced electric wheelchair vehicle control & drive systems used by major wheelchair OEMs such as Pride Mobility and Otto Bock. Headquartered in Mount Kisco, New York, Curtis was founded in 1960 and specializes in integrated electric vehicle technology.