

SELECTION OF A POWER WHEELCHAIR

In selecting a power wheelchair it is important that you plan for the likelihood that your needs may change as time goes on and select a chair that can be modified as needed. In addition to the Rehabilitation Equipment Supplier, I would recommend that you have a Physical or Occupational Therapist involved in the evaluation and selection process. If possible, select a therapist who has had experience in performing seating and mobility evaluations and recommending power wheelchairs. This healthcare professional can be very helpful in acting as your advocate with both the supplier and the funding source. In most cases, detailed letters of medical necessity are required for funding and the therapist is usually the one to write these letters.

In general, I would recommend that you get as many of the potentially helpful options as can be justified in the beginning. This will prevent delays in meeting your future needs by limiting the number of major changes that might need to be made to the chair.

You may want to speak with two or three suppliers before you decide who you want to work with. The following questions would be important to ask your Rehabilitation Equipment Supplier:

- How often do you provide this type of custom power wheelchair? How many clients with my diagnosis have you worked with? What are your professional credentials? Do you attend continuing education classes? (link to C1)
- What is included in your assessment before you recommend a chair for me? (link to C2)
- What type of power base do you recommend? (C3)
- What type of electronics will the chair have? Will I be able to operate other functions through the controls that drive the chair? (C4)
- What type of seat will be on the chair? (C5)
- Will my chair have power tilt, recline or power elevating legrests? (C6)
- What type of positioning and pressure relieving equipment do you recommend? (C7)
- What other options might I need? (C8)
- What will my insurance pay for? (C9)

C1. How often do you provide this type of custom power wheelchair? How many clients with my diagnosis have you worked with? What are your professional credentials? Do you attend continuing education classes?

You need a supplier that has experience with the “high end” equipment, which can be technically difficult. It is preferable to work with a supplier who is a member of NRRTS (National Registry of Rehabilitation Suppliers). Membership in this group requires a certain number of years of experience, references, and yearly continuing education classes. Members also have to abide by a code of ethics established by the group. A list of members is available on the NRRTS web site, www.nrrts.org.

C2. What is included in your assessment before you recommend a chair for me? If you have a therapist involved, some of these areas may be covered by him/her. Never purchase a wheelchair from a supplier that you have never met with for an assessment!

A good supplier should include the following in his/her assessment:

- The supplier should either have some knowledge of ALS or should ask you for information about its characteristics.
- Measurements should be taken of your body size ie hip width, thigh length, seat to top of head, among others.
- Your posture should be assessed.
- Your muscle strength and any limitations in joint flexibility should be tested by the therapist or the supplier should get this information from your physician.
- Your functional abilities should be assessed ie what activities are you having problems performing?
- A home visit should be done, if possible, to assess your home environment. If a visit is not possible, there should be a discussion of your home environment including door widths, types of surfaces on which the chair will be used, etc.
- There should be discussion of how you will transport the chair. If you already have a van or a bumper carrier on your vehicle, the supplier should look at it and take measurements.
- The supplier should be able to give you information regarding different equipment options along with the pros and cons of each. There are many products available and no one product is right for every person. If the supplier only carries equipment from one manufacturer, he may not be the best choice to provide your chair.

C3. What type of power base do you recommend?

- Most of the high end power wheelchairs consist of the power base with a seating system attached. This allows for the selection of different types of seating systems that can be changed without purchasing a whole new chair.
- While there are many manufacturers of power wheelchair bases, the most commonly used are Invacare, Quickie, Pride, and Permobil.
- Power bases come in rear-wheel, mid-wheel or front-wheel drive. The mid and front wheel drive chairs have a tight turning radius which makes them very maneuverable. Some clients find them to be more difficult to control than rear-wheel drive, especially at slower speeds or with some of the specialty controls. Design changes are being made to lessen this problem. If possible, ask to test drive each type to get a feel for how they handle.

C4. What type of electronics will the chair have? Will I be able to operate other functions through the controls that drive the chair?

- You will need the upgraded electronics. Although the names may vary with the manufacturer, there are two main types of electronics: the integral joystick and the remote.
 - Integral will have a fairly large box to which the joystick is attached and a thick cable coming from the box. These electronics may be programmable for

speed etc but cannot be adapted for other types of controls or to operate power tilt or recline. **YOU DO NOT WANT THIS TYPE OF ELECTRONICS!**

- Remote will have a smaller box to which the joystick is attached and will have a small cable coming from the joystick box to a separate control box either on the back of the wheelchair or underneath the seat. This control box contains the “brains” of the chair and makes it possible to adapt the electronics for various types of controls. **THIS IS WHAT YOU WANT!!**
- The electronics should allow for:
 - programming the speed and sensitivity of the controls
 - use of various types of controls including joystick, breath control, head control, single switch control
 - use of the wheelchair controls to operate other power functions such as power tilt or recline, computers, or augmentative communication devices.
- Another control to consider is an attendant joystick so that the chair can be controlled by someone walking beside or behind. This control would be in addition to the user’s control. This control can be very useful if the wheelchair user becomes fatigued or has difficulty operating the chair in tight spaces.

C5. What type of seat will be on the chair?

Many of the power bases can be equipped with either a Captain’s style seat or a Rehab Seat.

- Captain’s seat: This seat looks very much like a bucket seat out of a car. It is padded and upholstered in either vinyl or cloth. The backrest has some curve built in that can give minimal postural support. In most cases it can be reclined manually. The seat can be removed and replaced with a solid seat pan so that a pressure relieving cushion can be used. The Captain’s seat cannot be used with power tilt or recline and there is very little that can be done to customize it. For this reason I would recommend starting out with the Rehab Seat. If you choose to start out with the Captain’s seat, you can change to the Rehab seat later at an additional cost.

- Rehab Seat: This type of seat may be called by different names depending on which manufacturer is used. Basically it is a seat frame to which various seat pans and cushions or backrests can be added, depending on the needs of the user. These seats are usually adjustable in terms of width and depth so that they can be changed if the user’s weight changes significantly. This type of seat frame is also necessary when adding power tilt or recline.

C6. Will my chair have power tilt, recline or power elevating legrests?

Many individuals with ALS become very uncomfortable if required to sit in the same position for long periods of time. These power options allow the wheelchair user to reposition themselves as often as needed for comfort and to redistribute weight from the buttocks to the back. If funding permits, a combination of both power tilt and recline will allow for the most options for position changes.

- Power recline: This feature allows the user to recline the back of the chair as much as desired or until they are laying flat on their back. This provides relief of pressure over the buttocks and stretching and repositioning of the hips. Be sure that the power recline is “Zero Shear”, which means that the backrest travels on a track as you

recline instead of your back sliding against the backrest. Zero shear can also be accomplished by using a sliding seat pan. This feature helps you to maintain your position in the chair.

- **Power tilt:** This feature allows the user to tilt the entire seat back while they remain positioned in a sitting position. This provides relief of pressure over the buttocks. When combined with elevating legrests, it also allows the user to elevate his feet above the level of his heart to reduce swelling.
- **Power elevating legrests:** This feature allows the user to elevate his feet and straighten the knees. This may help with changing position when the person becomes uncomfortable. When combined with power tilt, these legrests will help reduce lower extremity edema. Power elevating legrests will need to be the articulating or pivoting legrests, which means that the length of the legrest increases as it elevates in order to maintain correct positioning. If insurance will not cover power elevating legrests, manual elevating legrests are an option but would require someone else to raise and lower them for the client. The manual elevating legrests are also available in the articulating or pivot style.

C7. What type of positioning and pressure relieving equipment do you recommend?

- **Backrests:** There are numerous manufacturers of wheelchair backrests. A backrest should be chosen for you depending on your individual needs. They are available in various heights and widths. The backrest needs to be tall enough to cover your shoulder blades in order to provide enough support when tilting or reclining. Trunk supports can be added on each side of the backrest in order to prevent the user from falling to the side. You may want to go ahead and order the trunk supports, even if you choose to wait and put them on at a later date. They can be fixed or swing-away. Lumbar supports can be added in the low back area for comfort and support. Make sure that the backrest that is chosen for you is well padded so that it will be comfortable.
- **Seat cushions:** Seat cushions are used for pressure relief, comfort and positioning. Cushions are made of a variety of materials, depending on the manufacturer. These include various types of foam, gel and air-filled bladders. Ask if the supplier or therapist has an example of the cushion that they are recommending for you to try. Some cushions are better at pressure relief at the expense of stability and vice versa. Trying the cushion will help you decide if that particular type meets your needs. Pads can be added on the outside of your thighs or between your knees to help position your legs, if necessary.
- **Headrest:** A headrest will be necessary any time you order a chair with power tilt and/or recline in order to support your head when you are leaned backward. A headrest may also be necessary to provide support for weak neck muscles. You may start with a simple curved pad. If additional side support is needed, there are several types of modular headrests to which pads can be added in any position that is required. Headbands can also be added to prevent your head from falling forward. Be sure to request that the headrest be padded well for comfort. The headrest may also serve as a place to mount switches that can be activated by head movements.
- **Armrests:** Be sure that you order height adjustable armrests so that they can be adjusted to the correct height for you. Your arms should be able to rest comfortably

on the armrests without you having to lean forward to reach them and without the armrest pushing your shoulders upward. Padded arm troughs can be added to the armrest to provide support and prevent your arms from slipping off of the armrests. These troughs come in various lengths that can support just the elbows and forearms to full-length troughs that support the hands as well. The hand pieces can be flat or contoured to the shape of the relaxed hand, with a slight curve. Pads can be added behind the elbows to prevent the arms from slipping off the back of the trough when the chair is leaned backward. Padded straps can also be added to hold the users arms in place.

C8. What other options might I need?

- Ventilator tray: Make sure that the power base and seating system that is selected for you can accommodate a ventilator tray on the back if necessary. It should be hinged such that it will remain level when you tilt or recline.
- Shock absorption: Pneumatic tires rather than solid tires will reduce the road shock when driving the chair over rough terrain. They will also improve your traction when driving over obstacles. Some power chairs also have shock absorbers built into the base. Whether or not these are necessary for you will depend on the type of terrain where you will be using the chair.
- Lap tray: A lap tray is a piece of wood or Plexiglas that sits on top of the wheelchair armrests and provides a surface on which to work or to carry items.
- Accessory mounts: There are various mounting systems available that will allow you to mount just about any accessory that you might need on your wheelchair. This might include an augmentative communication device, computer, camera, fishing pole, cup holders etc

C9. What will my insurance pay for?

Although it may be difficult to give you an exact amount that your insurance will pay for a power wheelchair, your supplier should be able to give you some idea. Most insurance companies will require a prescription from your doctor and a Letter of Medical Necessity stating why you need the recommended equipment. This is where the therapist can help in justifying the wheelchair. In general, insurance companies will pay for medical equipment only if it is necessary to increase the client's functional independence, and prevent medical problems that might arise from being bed-confined. They will not pay for items that they consider as convenience items.

- Medicare: Generally a person becomes eligible for Medicare 2 years after they become disabled or at age 65. In the case of ALS, it may be possible to be approved for Medicare earlier. Medicare pays for a power wheelchair if the patient is unable to walk or push a manual wheelchair "inside his home". They pay 80% of what they have set as their allowable for a particular type of wheelchair. Unfortunately, Medicare will not always tell you ahead of time if they will pay for your chair. The chair must be delivered to you before it can be billed, which is why the supplier may ask you to sign a form saying that you will be responsible if Medicare denies payment. For chairs that require power options (tilt, recline) or specialty electronics the supplier can get a prior authorization. There are appeal procedures in the event that Medicare denies your chair and you should ask the supplier if they will assist you

in taking your case through the appeals process, if necessary. If you have a supplemental policy, you may have no out of pocket expense.

- Medicaid: Alabama Medicaid is just now beginning to pay for power wheelchairs for adults. You must be evaluated by a therapist from the list of hospital-based clinics compiled by the Medicaid office. Medicaid has set allowables for different types of power chairs. The program is too new to know for certain if the needs of the ALS patient can be met under these allowables.
- Other insurance: Each commercial health insurance policy can vary in what it will cover and at what amount. You should contact your company representative and get specific information regarding your coverage, limits, deductibles, and co-payments. You may also need to ask them if they have certain suppliers that they require you to use.