

WHEELCHAIR FACTSHEET

Buying a wheelchair is a big decision – and can also be an expensive one. Careful consideration, research and planning will help you find a chair that completely meets your needs. The information below will help you with your choices.

Q Where do I start?

A First, be clear about what you want a wheelchair for, how often you're going to use it, and where you want to go in it. Think of these factors as the three W's – **Why?** **When?** **Where?** and make a list of your needs under each factor.

Some helpful questions to ask yourself are:-

- Do I need a wheelchair all the time or only occasionally?
- Do I need a wheelchair for indoor or outdoor use, or both?
- Do I plan to propel the chair myself?
- How will I get in and out of the wheelchair?
- Is my home accessible for a wheelchair?
- Do I need to put the wheelchair into and out of the car?
- Do I want to use the wheelchair on rough ground?
- Will I need to be transported in the wheelchair? e.g. on a bus or in a taxi
- Will I need to take by wheelchair on holiday? e.g. on flights or sea journeys

Q What next?

A Having a clear picture of why, when and where you need your chair will help you decide on the type of wheelchair and specific features you will need. The following factors will help you make an informed choice about what will be best for you:

Are you sitting comfortably?

You need to be able to sit comfortably in a good position to complete your everyday tasks, so having a stable sitting base is crucial.

Make sure the seat width and depth are right for you, because too much or too little of either gives you poor posture and may lead to pressure areas.

Backrest shape, angle and height are equally important so try out different combinations.

Are the cushions built for comfort?

Like any other furniture, the seat of a wheelchair is only ever as comfortable as the cushion you are sitting on – so make sure you get good ones!

A huge variety of cushions are available;- basic foam, upholstered, contoured memory foam, gel, air cells, alternating air and almost any combination of these. The type of cushion you need will vary depending on how often you use the wheelchair, how long you sit in it at any one time, and whether you are able to adjust your own position to relieve pressure. Whether the cushion is waterproof is also a consideration.

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Cushions are often referred to as providing low, medium, or high pressure relief but these descriptions should only be seen as a guide. Choosing the right cushion for each individual situation is not a matter for guesswork so it is always worth getting advice from either an experienced wheelchair sales advisor, or a professional such as a Specialist Nurse or Occupational Therapist.

Q What about wheels?

A There are many rear wheel and front castor choices. Generally the larger the rear wheel the easier the chair is to propel; whereas, at the front, larger castors create more rolling resistance so small is better, except when coping with uneven ground.

Don't forget to think about tyres. Pneumatic tyres give a smoother ride than solid ones but need to be kept at the correct pressure; and there is always the risk of a puncture. It is possible to adjust the pressure in the tyres to cope with different situations (e.g. more air for less resistance, less air for a softer ride and coping with things like snow or ice).

Take a look at these helpful advice guides:-

www.nhs.uk/conditions/social-care-and-support-guide/pages/mobility-equipment-wheelchairs-scooters.aspx

www.which.co.uk/reviews/mobility-equipment/article/guides

www.ridc.org.uk/features-reviews/out-and-about

www.gerald-simonds.co.uk/buying_a_wheelchair_guide.php

www.independentliving.co.uk/manualwheelchair.pdf

What type of wheelchair?

Q Wheelchair types vary, which is why it's so important to think about what you're using them for.

A When buying your first active wheelchair, choose one which has lots of adjustable features. It takes a while to find out what position suits you best, and provides most comfort, so it's best not to start with a made-to-measure chair, where nothing can be altered.

You can choose between a folding, or a rigid, frame. A folding chair can be easier to store or transport, but a rigid frame may be better if you're likely to spend a lot of time in the chair. A rigid frame is also better if you want to add power add-ons or an "all terrain" add-on wheel which lifts the two front castors off the ground (this can help with rough terrain which standard wheelchair castors simply couldn't cope with - see www.gerald-simonds.co.uk

The following types of wheelchair are available:-

Basic Manual wheelchairs are usually good for a carer to push you around in (often referred to as attendant propelled); or if you don't need to rely on a chair as your only means of getting around. Most basic chairs are made of heavier materials and tend to come in standard sizes with a limited choice of features.

If you only need your chair to get from A to B, a few times a week, then a basic model will usually

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Active lightweight wheelchairs are usually much more adjustable; with different frame design, arm and foot rest, wheel size, seat and backrest options, and even a choice of material. They are great if you're going to spend a lot of time in your chair as they are lighter and more manoeuvrable and, if matched correctly to your needs, should give you a comfortable, stable and practical means of getting around. They're also much easier to fold and lift, for transport and storage purposes.

Powered wheelchairs from basic models designed for indoor use, to multi-adjustable chairs that can be configured to your specific postural needs. Higher specification models can change your position, from fully reclined to standing upright, and can travel up to 25 miles over a variety of terrains.

Powered chairs are usually driven with a joystick and you need to be able to operate this easily. This includes making sure that your eyesight and reaction speed are good enough to drive the chair safely in busy places, without bumping into objects or people.

If you're going to use a powered wheelchair as your sole means of getting about, both in and outside the home, there are lots of adjustable features that will give you more personal independence, such as seat risers or lights. However, the more features and functions a chair has the higher the cost, so be sure you will make good use of everything you will be paying for.

It's worth remembering that buying powered wheelchairs is a major financial outlay. They can cost as much as a small car so shouldn't be considered lightly. They are complex pieces of machinery that you're likely to use for many years so will need test driving before you buy and regular maintenance and servicing afterwards.

You may find it helpful to look at the following advice guide: www.ridc.org.uk/features-reviews/out-and-about/getting-powered-wheelchair

Power add-ons for manual wheelchairs are great if you don't want a fully powered wheelchair but feel you need 'an extra boost' to help make pushing your manual wheelchair easier. You can choose from the following features:-

- Power assist wheels - with batteries in to the large self propelling rear wheels
- Add on power drives - where motors are built into each of the large self propelling rear wheels and supplied with a detachable joystick control - usually powered with a light weight lithium battery which is fixed underneath the seat. See www.gerald-simonds.co.uk
- Add on motors – normally fitted under the chair to give an additional drive wheel
- Trike conversion – where a separate attachment fitted to your chair effectively converts it into an electric tricycle that you drive via handlebars

None of the above features are particularly cheap and unless you have a high specification active wheelchair you may find that rather than 'adding-on' it's more cost-effective to buy a powered wheelchair. However, the upside of add-ons is that they make chairs less weighty and therefore more transportable (without the use of a hoist, hydraulic lift or ramps).

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Further details of add-on products can be found at:

www.gerald-simonds.co.uk/c/power-wheelchairs/

drivedevilbiss.co.uk/our-products/powered-mobility-wheelchairs/accessories

www.tgamobility.co.uk/range/powerpacks

www.cyclonemobility.com

Q What if I fancy a scooter?

A Scooters are often chosen by people who are generally mobile around and about the home but struggle to manage any distance outdoors. It is really important to consider the environment you're likely to use a scooter in. Some have very shallow ground clearance, 3-wheel models are less stable than 4-wheel models, and if you live in a hilly area you'll need to make sure the motor drive is powerful enough to cope with the demands of the terrain.

A scooter is also a large piece of equipment which needs to be stored somewhere dry, safe and secure when not in use, as well as being close to a power supply for charging. It is also worth bearing in mind that unlike many wheelchairs, a scooter is not easily transportable in a car or on a train. This information covers all the factors to consider: www.ridc.org.uk/features-reviews/out-and-about/mobility-scooters

Q What are Gennys?

A A Genny is a two-wheeled, class two mobility scooter, only recently available in the UK, adapted from the Segways you see people riding about on in some cities or parks.

Gennys are self-balancing and steering is controlled by a light push left or right on the handlebar. You can regulate the speed by leaning forwards and backwards. The further forwards you lean, the faster it goes, reaching a top speed of 8 miles per hour (limited to 4mph in towns). Gennys work on rough or muddy terrain and can be adapted for off-road use, handling slopes of up to 18 degrees and with a battery life of 10 – 15 miles.

They are not really suitable for sitting in all day, but are great for exercise as they can help build core strength every time you change direction. They are easy to dismantle, allowing removal of the front post so you can sit at a table, and fit into a reasonably sized car. A car hoist is yet to be designed.

If you're thinking of buying a Genny try one first to make sure you feel safe and comfortable. They are not cheap and come with a price tag of £13,500 plus an extra £1,499 for the off-road kit – so it pays to think carefully before getting one. They are great fun to use but are not the ideal replacement for a wheelchair so can be a bit of a luxury.

To find out more and arrange a test ride go to www.gennymobility.com/uk or call 01322 303473 (Dartford). You can also visit magicmobility.co.uk or call 0800 772 3210.

Q Who can help me find and try wheelchairs?

A The following agencies can help you find and try wheelchairs:-

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The NHS

To get an NHS wheelchair, you will need to ask your GP, Consultant, Physiotherapist or Occupational Therapist to refer you to your local wheelchair service. They will have the details of the wheelchair service which covers your area. Each area has their own procedures to help them decide the type of wheelchair (if any) they will supply. Further information including a list of the various Wheelchair Services Centres is available here: www.nhs.uk/conditions/social-care-and-support-guide/care-services-equipment-and-care-homes/walking-aids-wheelchairs-and-mobility-scooters/

Independent Living Centres / Equipment Demonstration Centres

Many cities have centres offering free help and advice on choosing specialist products such as wheelchairs and scooters. Most have at least one qualified Occupational Therapist or Physiotherapist on their staff. To find a centre near you go to livingmadeeasy.org.uk/motability

Motability scheme

If you get the high rate mobility component of one of the applicable disability benefits you could consider one of the all inclusive leasing packages available via the Motability Scheme. www.motability.co.uk/whats-available/scooters-wheelchairs/scooters/

Independent Occupational Therapists

You can also get advice from a qualified private Occupational Therapist, particularly if you have specialist or complex needs; but you will need to pay for their professional services. A list of Occupational Therapists in Independent Practice can be found at rcotss-ip.org.uk/

Q Do I need insurance?

A We recommend that you take out wheelchair insurance so that you are covered in the case of accidental damage, loss or theft – and also because you can do a lot of damage to people or property, when you are driving one.

A number of insurance companies offer cover – and those recommended by beneficiaries include Fish Insurance www.fishinsurance.co.uk – a company run for and by disabled people – and Mark Bates markbatesltd.com

Q Where can I get further information?

A If you need further help and advice about getting a wheelchair, mobility scooter, or segway you can contact the Health and Wellbeing team on 01480 474074 email Hello@thalidomidetrust.org

Other useful sources of information are:-

Getting a wheelchair into a car www.ridc.org.uk/features-reviews/out-and-about/car-adaptations/getting-wheelchair-or-mobility-scooter-car

Advice on wheelchair accessible vehicles (WAVs) www.ridc.org.uk/features-reviews/out-and-about/wheelchair-accessible-vehicles-wavs-0

Rules governing the use of powered wheelchairs and scooters on the road www.gov.uk/mobility-scooters-and-powered-wheelchairs-rules

Differences between class 2 and class 3 scooters www.independentliving.co.uk/il-editorials/mobility-scooters/