

The ALS Patient Care and Research Center at UCSF

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) About Wheelchairs for people with motor neuron disease (like ALS)

When do I need a wheelchair?

We recommend a wheelchair when you or your caregivers notice one or more of the following problems:

- Poor balance, frequent tripping or falling.
- Tiring quickly with walking and/or standing.
- Worsening leg weakness (often noticed as “legs giving way”).
- Spasticity (stiffness) that makes it tiring to walk/stand or difficult to balance.
- Slowness of walking that makes it impractical to walk (i.e., not able to cross street safely).

What type of chair do I need?

There are 2 general types of wheelchairs. Which one you should get will depend on your individual needs.

A. Manual wheelchairs

- These require you or a caregiver to move them.
- Smaller in size than power wheelchairs, so they fit through doorways easier. They are also lighter than power wheelchairs, so they are easier to transport.
- Can be standard fit (i.e., not custom made) folding chairs for transportation purposes, such as getting to and from appointments or going shopping. These types of manual wheelchairs are the lightest and least expensive, but are not comfortable to sit in for long periods of time.
- Manual wheelchairs can also be custom fit for you. Custom fit manual wheelchairs are a little heavier and a lot more expensive than standard fit chairs, and are a little harder to transport. However, they can be designed (by special cushions, leg and back supports) to be comfortable for long periods of time.

B. Power or electric wheelchairs

- These use a battery for power, so do not require you or your caregiver to move it. They require the least amount of strength and energy to operate.
- They are designed to run for several hours at a time, so they can be used indoors or to travel distances in your neighborhood.
- These are larger and heavier than manual wheelchairs, so they are harder to fit through doorways and are much more difficult to transport. It usually requires some modifications to your car (i.e., special hitch) or a special van to transport them.
- Power wheelchairs are usually custom fit for you and are the most expensive types of chairs.

What should I look for in a wheelchair?

A. Manual Wheelchair

1. Standard fit (for transportation)

- Good fit (seat height, seat depth and backrest height).
- Lightweight and easy to move.
- Easy to fold.
- Removable leg rests.
- Removable arm rests.
- Large wheels (to make it easier to go up and down curbs).
- Brake handle extensions (optional).

2. Custom fit (for sitting in several hours a day)

- Good fit (seat height, depth and backrest height).
- Lightweight and easy to move.
- Easy to fold.
- High reclining back feature that can be adapted for a headrest later.
- Pressure relieving cushion (this can be a gel, foam or air chamber type cushion).
- Removable and elevating leg rests.
- Removable and adjustable height arm rests.
- Large wheels (to make it easier to go up and down curbs).
- Brake handle extensions (optional).

B. Electric Wheelchair

- Tilt/ Recline seating system.
- Removable and elevating leg rests.
- High reclining back feature that can be adapted for a headrest later.
- Pressure relieving seat cushion, such as a gel or air chamber type cushion.
- Removable and adjustable height arm rests.
- Custom fit back that can be adapted for side (lateral trunk) supports if needed.
- Controls that can be modified later, for example foot or head activated controls.
- Power seat lift.

Why not a scooter?

For long-term use, we do not recommend scooters for the following reasons:

- Scooters are often not as durable, reliable or as well built as power wheelchairs, so they may not last as long.
- The backrests on scooters do not recline nor provide as much support.
- The backrests on scooters cannot be modified (such as adding a headrest or trunk support) if you need something changed later on.
- The seats on scooters do not relieve pressure as do the special seats on power wheelchairs. Also, the seats on scooters cannot be modified (such as adding a thigh support) if you need something changed later on.
- Scooter controls require more hand and arm strength to operate than do controls on a power wheelchair. Also, the controls on scooters cannot be modified (i.e., using a foot or head activated switch) if you need something changed later on.

How do I get a wheelchair?

- You should discuss your needs with your physician and your physical and occupational therapists. Your physician will give you a prescription for the specific wheelchair that you need.
- The ALS Center will give you names of wheelchair vendors close to your home. For custom fit manual or power wheelchairs, you should contact the wheelchair vendor for an appointment; at this appointment a seating specialist (ideally either an occupational or physical therapist) will perform a wheelchair assessment and order the appropriate chair for you.
- It often takes two to three months to receive a custom fit wheelchair. For that reason, we often recommend that you start to order the wheelchair as soon as you can.
- Many health insurance companies will pay for only one manual and one power wheelchair. In addition, many insurance companies will only pay for one wheelchair to be custom fitted. If both of these conditions apply to your insurance, we recommend that you get a custom fit power wheelchair and get a standard fit manual wheelchair for transportation purposes.

What if I can't afford a wheelchair?

- The Muscular Dystrophy Association (MDA) has some funding available to help you get the wheelchair you need. Talk with the staff at the ALS Center to find out more about this.
- There is also a "loan closet" that is run by the MDA. There are sometimes wheelchairs in this closet that you can borrow.