

Wheelchair - Selecting a Power Chair

New Mexico

Types of power chairs

Power chairs are an option for people who may have little to no use of their upper body. They can be either a chair or a scooter with an electric motor controlled by a joystick. They can come as a three to four wheel scooter, or as a chair with front, mid, or rear-wheel drive.

Things to consider for power chairs

Power chairs are just as customizable as manual chairs. There are a few things to consider for selection however.

- **Weight capacity:** A typical power chair can carry up to 300 pounds. There are heavy-duty power chairs that can accommodate larger users or support the weight of additional equipment such as: ventilators, feeding tubes, etc.
- **Dimensions:** The dimensions will be how well the chair accommodates an individual's body, and how it fits through doors and hallways. The user should be fitted so they can operate their chair where they most need it.
- **Battery range:** Batteries usually last 10 to 25 miles on a full charge. This will vary with factors such as the age of the battery, the user's weight, and the type of terrain it is being used on.
- **Speed:** Speed is important if the user is planning to use their chair for long distances. Usually a rear-drive power chair will provide the most speed, which can reach up to 8.5 mph.
- **Turning radius:** If the user is planning to use their chair in confined spaces, it is good to know how the chair handles turns. Front and mid-wheel drive chairs typically have a turn radius between 20 and 30 inches; a rear-wheel drive chair is around 40 inches or more.
- **Portability:** For those with a more active lifestyle, portability is a significant element when deciding on their chair. Some are foldable, while others can be taken apart and reassembled for easy travel. The user should also consider how they plan to transport their chair.
- **Adjustability:** Because the user will be seated in their chair for most of their day, adjustability is key. Many models have the ability to recline, tilt, and elevate the seat as needed to provide comfort. A few even allow the user to operate their chair from a standing position to strengthen the cardiovascular system and prevent pressure sores.
- **Wheels:** There are a few factors that influence how a chair operates when it comes to wheels. The size and location of the wheels will influence the maneuverability, speed, and the chair's ability to go over rough terrain. Rear-wheel drive chairs have greater speed, mid-wheel drive chairs have a tighter turn radius, and front-wheel drive chairs are better for uneven terrain. The larger the casters, or the wheels that stabilize the chair and do not provide power, the better the chair can handle uneven surfaces. This also means that the chair will be slower however.

Things to remember:

- Scooters have more speed than chairs but less maneuverability
- Users need to change positions frequently to prevent pressure sores
- It's important to work with an Occupational Therapist (OT), Physical Therapist (PT), and/or a Primary Physician (MD) to define the need and provide justification
- Charge batteries whenever chair is not in use to prevent becoming stranded



Choosing a Power Wheelchair

<https://motioncares.ca/article/choosing-electric-wheelchair-what-consider>

How to Choose a Manual Wheelchair:

<https://www.spinlife.com/en/HowToChooseAManualWheelchair.cfm>

Picking the Right Wheelchair:

<https://www.christopherreve.org/living-with-paralysis/wheelchairs/how-to-pick-the-right-wheelchair-for-you>

Department of Health

Seating Clinic:

DDSD Specialty Clinic

505-232-5726

Carrie Tingley:

Outpatient Services

505-272-5200

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1-800-552-8195

or visit our website at <https://goto.unm.edu/x8gmt>

Informational Tip Sheets:

<https://goto.unm.edu/>