



Bariatric Wheelchair Basics



Today, 51 million Americans are obese, according to the American Obesity Association. If you're one of them, your condition may begin to cause bodily pain and affect normal daily activities, such as walking. When this happens, many people choose to isolate themselves from society, afraid and embarrassed to ask for help. But a life of isolation doesn't have to be in your future.

Along with creating an exercise and diet program, health professionals can prescribe wheelchairs that will allow you to continue living an independent life while you rehabilitate. Many wheelchair options are available, however, so it's important to choose the best one. The following are options that you and your health provider should consider when choosing a bariatric wheelchair.

Body weight. If you're deciding between two sizes, consider opting for the larger and wider size. Remember, the final design should be able to hold your maximum weight potential.

Seat height. When therapists measure seat height, your feet should be flat on the floor and your shin should be in a vertical posture. Your therapist should measure from the back of the heel to the underside of the knee. During this process, wear typical footwear so your therapist can determine proper footrest length and overall wheelchair height.

Seat depth. You should have nearly 1 to 2 inches of space between the back of your knee and the front of your wheelchair seat. This will preserve your lower leg circulation while maximizing your weight-bearing surface and leg mobility during foot-assisted propulsions. Your wheelchair's seat surface also should support your entire gluteal region. A contoured cushion or strap backrest may help provide sufficient trunk support.

Seat width. Your wheelchair seat width should offer nearly 1 to 2 inches of width on either side of your body. This leaves room for winter clothing, weight shifting

during pressure relief and lift devices, such as slings. On occasion, you may opt to remove wheelchair push rims to accommodate narrow doorways or environmental barriers.

Backrest height. Your backrest should reach to your mid shoulder blade and support the apex of your back. This will diminish the potential for postural back pain, provide adequate pressure relief and allow maximal shoulder blade mobility.

If you're in a reclining chair, then you may need additional upper thoracic support. If you're more agile, you may prefer a backrest that's positioned vertically, just 1 inch below your shoulder blade, which will give you maximal upper body mobility. If your back is only partially touching the backrest when you're seated, your therapist might recommend a strap or laced back backrest to provide sufficient support.

Armrest height. Correct armrest height helps decrease neck and thoracic back pain by providing adequate support for the shoulder girdle. When determining armrest height, therapists should measure directly from the sitting surface to the bent elbow, keeping your forearm parallel to the seat.

Hard seat applications. Solid hard seat applications provide you with weight bearing distribution and overall orthopedic alignment. For you, this translates into decreased muscular pain. A hard seat application also tends to be more durable, which is ideal if you rely on your wheelchair as a primary source of mobility.

Tires. Hard, solid tires have increased durability when turning. Pneumatic tires provide a smoother ride and greater energy return, but they have a tendency to roll off the rim while turning. Unlike solid tires, pneumatic tires and spoked rims also require continued maintenance.

Reclining wheelchair applications. If you're unable to sit vertically, you may need a reclining wheelchair application. Other medical conditions that could restrict you from upright postures include respiratory problems, orthostatic hypotension and psychological influences, such as fear.

Power wheelchair applications. Many people with cardiac insufficiencies require power applications. Some third-party payers will reimburse for power wheelchairs if the prescription will dramatically increase your participation in community activities and decrease your need for medical services.

Obesity is a serious condition that can cause disability. But with the right wheelchair prescription, you can maintain your mobility and independence while you work toward better health. ■

NOTES:

The purpose of this patient education handout is to further explain or remind you about a medical condition. This handout is a general guide only. If you have specific questions, be sure to discuss them with your health care provider. This handout may be reproduced for distribution to patients.

Information adapted from Choice Physical Therapy Inc. Accessed via www.bariatricrehab.com/wheelscript.htm.

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