

# “The wheelchair is how much?”

## An introduction to assistive devices and their costs



Photo: Drive Medical Canada

By Linda Norton, MSCH, BSc OT, OT Reg (Ont)

For the record, an “assistive device” is a piece of equipment such as a cane, wheelchair, walker or transfer device designed to improve the independence or safety of yourself or your loved ones.

When planning for future costs of care, it is important to have an understanding of the technology and costs involved, particularly when it comes to assistive devices. When doing the math, be sure to consider some of the most common equipment prescribed, the process for accessing this equipment and possible alternative funding sources available.

### *The assessment*

When considering buying an assistive device, an assessment by a therapist is usually the best way to begin. The cost of hiring an occupational or physical therapist familiar with assistive technology to complete an assessment is a sound investment. This will help ensure that the prescribed piece of equipment is best suited to meet the necessary needs and goals.

You may already have a therapist who is able to prescribe the device but for anyone living in a setting without access to a therapist, hiring one privately is an option. Rates can vary depending on the degree of involvement required. As an example, in Ontario a therapist may charge \$80 for a walker assessment, \$125 for a manual wheelchair

TABLE 1

### A summary of equipment types and costs

Equipment	Approximate cost (\$)
Folding walker	150
Rollator	500
Transport chair	200
Manual wheelchair	2,500–4,500
Cushions and back supports	350–1,000
Scooter	3,800
Power wheelchair	10,000
Power wheelchair with power dynamic seating	≥16,000
Raised toilet seat	60
Bath bench	60
Grab bars	40 plus installation
Commode	400–3,800
Folding portable ramp	500
Stair glide	3,500–17,000 depending on the stairway
Therapeutic support surface: Non-powered	800–3,000
Therapeutic support surface: Powered	≥5,000
Repositioning sheets	180
Ceiling lift with sling	3,500
Adapted van	60,000

assessment and \$200 for a power wheelchair assessment, so consider pricing out options before making an appointment.

### *The equipment*

The type of equipment most suitable for any individual depends on the diagnosis, living situation, functional abilities and goals. Within each category of equipment listed in Table 1, it is important to recognize that—as with cars and appliances—different types of mobility devices offer different features that can significantly impact the cost. A therapist can help to identify which features are needed and recommend the most appropriate piece of equipment within that category.

- **Folding walkers:** Are used by those who have poor balance but are still able to walk, or anyone who needs to take part of their weight off their legs.
- **Rollators:** Are usually equipped with a basket or back and have a seat to sit if you or the person you are caring for gets tired walking.

- **Transport chair:** May be appropriate for someone who is able to move over short distances, but has trouble getting around over longer distances.
- **Manual wheelchairs:** There are many different types of wheelchairs, from a standard folding chair to ones that tilt and recline.
- **Cushions and back supports:** Again, many different types of seat cushions and back supports are available.
- **Scoters:** Are a great way to increase outdoor mobility and independence if you or your care charge are able to walk within home, but struggle with outdoor mobility.

• **Power wheelchairs:** This may be the most appropriate option for anyone who is unable to ambulate in the home and cannot propel a manual wheelchair.

• **Power wheelchair with power dynamic positioning:** This is a power wheelchair

equipped with power tilt and/or power recline. These functions allow clients to change the angle of the seat and back to enable them to change their position in the chair.

• **Bathroom safety equipment:** Many falls happen in the bathroom and often result in injury. Investing in bathroom safety equipment (e.g., raised toilet seat, commode, grab bars, bath bench) if you or your loved one has decreased mobility may help to prevent falls.

The importance of grab bars cannot be overstated. We often try to hold towel racks, soap dishes or vanities for support and balance. These devices are not designed to support a person's weight and are likely to give way.

• **Home accessibility modifications:** For those with decreased mobility, some modifications to improve accessibility both outside and within the home may be required. A folding ramp may be an appropriate temporary solution to negotiate a few stairs at the doorway. A stair glide should be specifically designed if the staircase has a curve to it.

• **Therapeutic support surfaces (powered and non-powered):** These are either placed on top of the bed mattress or take the place of the mattress altogether. This type of device is often prescribed for people at risk of or who currently have a pressure ulcer. Check the manufacturer's warranty information to determine the expected lifespan of the equipment.

• **Transfer and repositioning equipment:** The ability to move from one surface to another—from the bed to the wheelchair, for example, or from the wheelchair to the commode—is critical to keeping our aging adults in our home environments. Many different pieces of equipment (e.g., ceiling lift, sling, repositioning sheets) are available to assist with these transfers and repositionings. Ceiling tracks with a sling can provide a lift, without having to store cumbersome equipment.

• **Adapted van and other vehicle modifications:** This may be required for travelling long distances. A variety of modifications can be

## Funding tips

Many charities will consider providing financial assistance for assistive technology. If a specific charity is unable to provide funding, always ask if they know of any other agencies that may be able to help. Some examples of these agencies include:

March of Dimes:  
[www.marchofdimes.ca](http://www.marchofdimes.ca)

Easter Seals:  
[www.easterseals.ca](http://www.easterseals.ca)

The Multiple Sclerosis Society:  
[www.msssociety.ca](http://www.msssociety.ca)

made, including driving controls, ramps, lifts, lowered floors and tie-down systems. A therapist specifically skilled in vehicle modification can be helpful in determining the most appropriate modifications.

### Funding

The funding available and the processes used to access such funding vary greatly by province. In some cases, devices may be rented or obtained from a loan cupboard. Once again, a therapist is an indispensable resource in helping to identify possible sources of funding and whether rental or loan equipment is available. Some sources of funding are listed in the sidebar; however, this is not an exhaustive list.

### Insurance

Many of us have extended health insurance. It is critically important to read the documents that outline the specific coverage. There are quite a few policies that will contribute to the purchase of one wheelchair or have a limited amount of

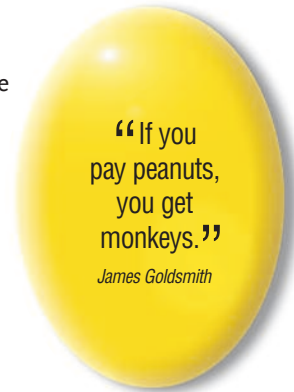
funding available each year in this category.

Future needs should be considered before accessing this funding. For example, if you or your loved one has a deteriorating illness and currently needs a manual wheelchair but will likely require a power wheelchair with power dynamic positioning in the future, it makes sense to “save” the insurance funding for the more expensive piece of equipment.

It is important to budget for assistive technology, but also for a therapist’s assessment. Involving a therapist in the process of obtaining equipment will ensure that you receive the most appropriate equipment, have access to potential sources of funding and have appropriate consideration given to both current and future lifestyle and needs. ●



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James Goldsmith

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