

ABLEDATA, Your Source for Assistive Technology Information

"I've Fallen, And I Can't Get Up!"

Informed Consumer Guide to Assistive Products for People with Temporary Disabilities

August, 1999

Introduction

So, you've broken your ankle, or a wrist, or some other part of your body. Or, you've just been in a car accident, or undergone surgery and are feeling lousy. You are going to have a cast on for at least twelve weeks. It's going to completely ruin all your plans for the next couple of months, you think. "I'm not going to be able to get around my house; just going to the toilet is going to be hard with that *&\$% cast on my leg. What about that trip to Florida that we'd planned? It obviously will have to be canceled . . ."

Temporary disabilities can be very painful, and they are inconvenient, but all that can be done while recovering will surprise you. The purpose of this Informed Consumer Guide is to provide information about devices and services that may be helpful. Although your illness or injury may have temporarily disabled you to some extent, there are literally thousands of people out there with permanent disabilities who live completely full and active lives. Their secret? They have assistive devices to aid them in their daily living activities, and they take advantage of programs and services available to people with mobility impairments. So, read the information below, see what applies to you, and don't let your illness or injury stop you from doing what you want to do! Further information about any of the products mentioned in this guide can be found by searching the ABLEDATA database on the ABLEDATA website (<http://www.abledata.com>).

Note: This guide will mention or describe several specific products to illustrate the features of general types of products. References to any product do not constitute a recommendation or endorsement of that product by ABLEDATA or the U.S. Department of Education. We encourage you to be a smart consumer. Try to find out as much as you can about the products that might fit your needs, and be an active participant in the selection of any product that you use.

General Principles

Establish Your Priorities

One of the first realities of disability, whether temporary or permanent, is to realize that everything is going to take a little longer to do. Rather than getting frustrated about this, it is much easier on you (and the rest of the family) to acknowledge this fact and incorporate it into your everyday routine. Getting ready in the morning, making breakfast, getting into a car, or walking from a car to your office building will all take more time. If you are accustomed to shoving as much activity into a 24-hour period as possible, consider this a good time to establish your priorities and decide what is most important to do. Then, do those things and leave the rest until you are feeling better.

Itemize the Special Needs Created by Your Injury

Think through a typical day in your life. How will your injury affect your ability to carry on your normal activity? Will you need help bathing? dressing? going to the bathroom? brushing your teeth? combing your hair? getting around the house? getting your meals? getting the laundry done? getting to work? going to the doctor? Make a list of your needs.

Identify and Use the Products and Services Available to People with Needs Like Yours

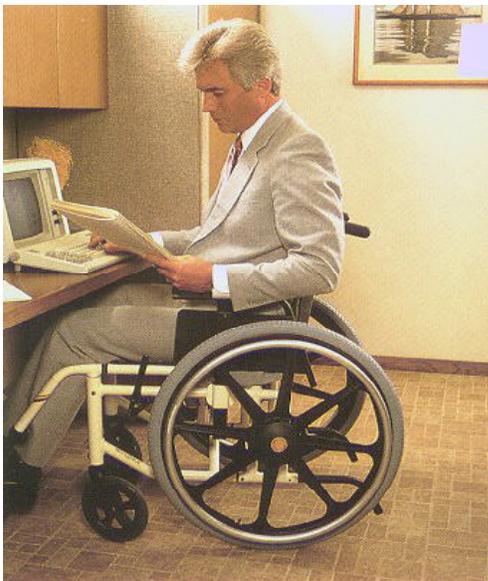
As soon as possible after your illness or accident occurs, start getting information about products and services that you might need. Many insurance plans will pay some of the cost of assistive devices. Other devices are relatively inexpensive, but add enormously to quality of life. Thus it makes no sense to make life more difficult by going without these products. So: Find out what options you have for accomplishing what needs to be done. You do not get "extra points" for doing things the hard way. If there is a prod-

uct or device out there to make life easier, use it! If you want to go shopping, for example, use a wheelchair or a scooter (many grocery stores now provide them for use by their customers) rather than attempting to do the job on crutches. If you insist on being as mobile as possible, you'll simply get tired faster and your frustration level will rise because you will be focusing on what you cannot do rather than on what you can. Save your energy for the things that are most important to you.

Getting Around

If you've broken a leg, ankle, or hip — anything that affects general mobility — you are going to have trouble getting around. There are several options: a wheelchair, a battery-powered scooter, a walker, crutches, or a cane. You may use several of these devices over the course of your recuperation. Use whatever your doctor and therapist recommend, and whatever feels most comfortable to you.

If you do use a wheelchair during part of this period, we suggest that you get one that you can maneuver by yourself. It should have large rear wheels, and you should be able to fold it to get it into and out of a car. It also should be lightweight so that you or someone else can lift it fairly easily. If it does not have large rear wheels, it is likely that the chair was designed for hospital or nursing home use. If you use that kind of chair you will always be dependent on someone else to push you around (NOT very conducive to a good frame of mind!).



The Quadra Express by Ortho-Kinetics provides an example of a lightweight wheelchair.

You also want to make sure that your wheelchair is narrow enough to get through doorways in your home. We

suggest that you measure your doorways before selecting a wheelchair to ensure that you will be able to get around your home easily.

If you expect to be unable to walk for a significant period of time, or if you are becoming weaker over time, you may want to invest in a scooter, which is a battery-powered cart. A scooter is particularly helpful if you will be traveling outside quite a bit, or if you will be traveling long distances down hallways or in mall areas. A scooter usually is not a good alternative for maneuverability around home because of its size and shape, so you may want to have a regular wheelchair, walker, or some other device to use around your home, depending upon your level of mobility.



Pride Health Care's Legend 3-wheel scooter provides indoor and outdoor mobility.

For more in-depth information on wheelchairs and scooters, check out the ABLEDATA fact sheets on manual and powered wheelchairs and scooters and the Guide to Wheelchair Selection, available for downloading at the ABLEDATA website (<http://www.abledata.com>) or for a nominal charge by calling 1-800-227-0216.

Walkers are the most under-appreciated members of the “mobility family”—probably because many people associate them with old age and nursing homes. Walkers are some of the most versatile mobility devices available. Most of them are both lightweight and foldable, which makes them easy to transport and easy to store. You can get them with wheels on the front legs or on all four legs. Other convenient add-ons include baskets or tote bags for carrying your possessions, and trays that attach to the front of the walker. You can place a fair amount of your weight on the walker itself, so it is especially good for people who are recovering from hip, leg or ankle surgery. Walkers also have the advantage of being comparatively inexpensive.



The Merry Walker is lightweight and can be folded for easy storage.

If you have read this far, you probably already have a set of crutches, because they are standard issue with virtually all lower extremity injuries or surgeries. When using crutches it is important to have them adjusted to the correct height. If they are too short, you will have to lean forward and use more energy with each step. Crutches that are too long place too much pressure under your arms. One symptom of crutches that are too long is a tingling in the hands caused by a decrease in the blood supply to the hands. Crutches that are too long also place you off balance and increase your risk of falling. Most standard crutches can be adjusted, however, to fit you and your needs.

If you expect to be on crutches for awhile, you may want to talk with your doctor about getting forearm crutches. Depending upon the nature of your injury, forearm crutches may be markedly more comfortable because they eliminate the intense underarm pressure that sometimes results from having to use standard crutches for an extended period of time.

Private insurance plans and Medicare may cover the cost of purchase or rental of mobility aids. We suggest that you discuss your mobility needs with your doctor or therapist so that you are able to get exactly what you need. Check with your local full-service pharmacy or medical equipment supplier for information on renting or leasing mobility equipment. Some medical equipment suppliers will rent equipment on a weekly or monthly basis, which is ideal for someone who needs to use it for only a limited period of time.

Daily Grooming

Getting into and out of a shower or bathtub can be difficult if you have limited mobility in your lower extremities. However, there are a number of products on the mar-

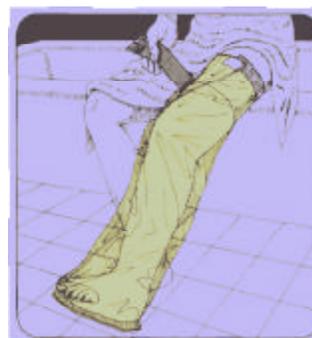
ket that enable one to move in and out of a shower or bathtub safely. Some of the most useful are:

- Shower chairs/bathtub benches
- Hand-held spray attachments
- Back brushes
- Safety treads
- Wash mitts and washcloths
- Shower or bathtub grab bars



A bathtub grab bar, such as this model from Guardian Products, can be a great help to people who have temporary disabilities that limit their mobility.

If you have a cast on, you may want to invest in cast protectors. An inexpensive alternative to a commercial cast protector is a plastic trash bag sealed to the skin with package sealing tape. In addition, a towel or washcloth around the arm or leg near the sealed opening will absorb any moisture that might seep in.



The Overcast Shower Cover is made of vinyl and fits arm or leg casts to protect them during bathing or showering.

Also useful are adaptations to the toilet. Especially helpful adaptations include:

- Raised toilet seats
- Grab bars
- Safety frames



The Elevated Toilet Seat from Maddak features padded arm rests that also serve as grab bars to aid the user as he/she sits down.

Getting Dressed

Getting dressed can be difficult if you have restricted movement. Fortunately, a lot of small, useful devices have been developed to help you accomplish these everyday tasks.

- Button aids
- Shoe aids
- Sock aids
- Other dressing aids



Maddak's Slip-On Dressing Aid uses its long handles with velcro covered ends to help users put on stockings, socks, underwear, or pants.

Stores such as J.C. Penney carry special lines of clothing for people who have difficulty dressing. For example, snaps or velcro fasteners instead of buttons can really make a difference if you have minimal use of your hands or a large cast. Also, if you are using a wheelchair for a period of time with a cast on your leg and do not have anyone to assist you with getting dressed, extra wide pant legs can make dressing easier, especially during the hot summer months. And, comfortable shorts are always cooler than sweatpants.

Exercise

If you are like many people, one of your first reactions after becoming ill or injured may have been, "Well, at least I have a good excuse not to exercise for awhile." We hate to take away a good excuse, but there are loads of exercise programs that have been developed specifically for people with lower mobility problems. You may not be able to run, dance or walk, but there are a number of resources available for cardiovascular workouts and upper body muscle toning. So, get ready...

The following companies distribute videos pertaining to strength, flexibility and aerobics exercise for all types of physical disabilities:

Brentwood Home Video
31344 Via Colinas, Suite 106
Westlake Village, CA 91362
Phone: 800-782-8892

JSR Enterprises, Inc.
12275 Greenleaf Avenue
Potomac, MD 20854
Phone: 301-279-2994

Disabled Sports USA
451 Hungerford Drive, Suite 100
Rockville, MD 20850
Phone: 301-217-0960
Fax: 301-217-0968
TTY: 301-217-0963

Canadian Wheelchair Sports
303-1600 James Naismith Drive
Gloucester, ON K1B 5N4
CANADA
Phone: 613-748-5685

For information on a variety of recreational and exercise equipment, contact:

Access to Recreation
2509 Thousand Oaks Boulevard, Suite 430
Thousand Oaks, CA 91362
Phone: 800-634-4351
URL: <http://www.coast-resources.com/accesstorecreation>

Within the ABLEDATA database, you may wish to try searching for equipment in the following categories:

Adapted sports/recreation equipment
Exercise equipment

Driving

It may seem impossible for you to drive a car safely if you do not have use of your legs, but thanks to hand controls, driving a car is still possible. Hand controls are just what they sound like: devices that enable you to accelerate and brake a car using your hands instead of your feet and legs. There may be special requirements for driving a vehicle with hand controls; check with your state's division of motor vehicles for information.

There also are attachments for the steering wheel (called spinners) that make driving possible for people with limited mobility in their arms and hands. Some spinners can be removed when not in use, so as not to impede another driver's use of the same vehicle.



The Hand Drive Company features a driving hand control that allows people who don't have use of their legs to control braking and acceleration by pressuring rings installed inside of the steering wheel.

Daily Living

There are lots of inexpensive devices around to make daily life a little easier. Many of them are not adaptive devices at all, but instead are conveniences that people use in everyday life, and can be found in kitchen stores or department stores. Some of the products that you might wish to consider include the following:

- Light switches that clap on and off
- Remote controls
- Portable phones
- Garage door openers
- One-handed can openers
- Reachers
- Holders for drinks, glasses, utensils, etc.
- Cutting boards for one hand use
- Brushes with suction cups
- Scoop dishes
- Door openers
- Under cabinet jar openers
- Wheeled laundry basket

For items not found in stores, you can contact companies such as Maddak, Inc. (800-443-4926, www.maddak.com), North Coast Medical (800-821-9319, www.ncmedical.com), and Sammons Preston (800-323-5547, www.sammonspreston.com). These companies

all have extensive catalogs of products for every day living needs.

Travel

It may seem a little daunting to attempt to travel with an injury or a temporary disability, but there are a number of resources available to make your trip less stressful. Our first piece of advice is to get a good travel agent that specializes in travel for people with disabilities. These are the people who already know what kinds of barriers you may encounter while on a trip.

Other general travel hints:

√ Make sure, if you are flying, that the airline knows you have a disability. They will allow you to board your flight early and can arrange for a seat in a convenient location. You also may want to arrange for skycap assistance to check your bags and to get you to your gate.

√ Airlines have "aisle chairs" (skinny little chairs on wheels designed to fit the narrow plane aisles) to get passengers with disabilities to their seats, so you should not have to walk down the aisle of the plane if you are unable to do so.

√ It is possible to arrange for rental cars with hand controls if you call the car rental agency in advance. Make sure that you have the necessary certification to drive a car with hand controls before attempting to do so, however.

√ Ask hotels for a handicapped accessible room. The bathroom will be larger than normal and the room generally is larger, as well. Make sure that you let the hotel know exactly what your needs are. For example, if you need a bathroom with a roll-in shower, you need to specifically request that. More and more hotels now are being built with a wide array of accessibility features, ranging from fully accessible (extra large bathroom with a roll-in shower) to moderately accessible (extra large bathroom with shower benches and transfer boards to be used in a standard bathtub) to minimally accessible (extra large bathroom with a standard bathtub and extra grab bars only). It is strictly up to the individual to decide which type of hotel room would best suit his/her needs.

√ If you are using a wheelchair, call a restaurant in advance to make sure that there are no steps to the en-

trance, and no steps inside the restaurant. You also may want to ask whether or not their restrooms are accessible to wheelchair users.

For more tips on traveling with a disability, we recommend exploring the travel links included under the "Recreation" and "Transportation" headings of the Assistive Technology Links page at the ABLEDATA website, (<http://www.abledata.com/text2/assistiv.htm>).

Tips

1. Determine what it is you want to do. Then,
2. Determine what you currently are unable to do because of illness or injury so that you can see what alternatives might be available.
3. Check out the product ideas above to see if they might meet your needs.
4. Search the ABLEDATA database online, or call one of our information specialists at 1-800-227-0216 for assistance in finding information about products that might be useful to you.
5. Use the web links we've provided at the ABLEDATA website (<http://www.abledata.com>) to get additional information about disability-related resources.

Remember, a temporary disability may slow you down, but it does not have to interfere significantly with your daily activities.

The ABLEDATA project maintains a database of assistive technology that provides information about and descriptions of more than 25,000 products for people with physical, sensory, or cognitive disabilities. ABLEDATA is funded by the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research of the U.S. Department of Education, and provides the public with free access to information specialists who will provide specific information about a particular device or about manufacturers and distributors of assistive technology. We can be reached by phone or fax at 800/227-0216, 301/608-8998 (V), or 301/608-8912 (TTY), or 301/608-8958 (Fax). Anyone with access to a computer, a modem, and the World Wide Web may also search the database 24 hours a day by visiting ABLEDATA's Website at <<http://www.abledata.com>>. ABLEDATA's fact sheets and informed consumer guides are available in *The Reading Room*, along with the latest on assistive technology and disability issues on the *News You Can Use* page.

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