

## Ask A Therapist: A column focusing on PPS questions and concerns By Maria Cole, OTR/L

### ***Is it possible for post-polio people to become overly dependent on assistive aids?***

Polio survivors are often very concerned about “overusing” assistive aids. From early in their lives, polio survivors were taught to keep exercising and rid themselves of any assistive devices. Therefore it can be very disheartening when a therapist now recommends an assistive aid.

When muscles are not supported or are in a very weakened state, body mechanics are changed thus increasing energy expenditure and possibly producing more pain. A device is prescribed when it is determined that stability, mobility and functionality will be enhanced. Appropriately prescribed walking aids decrease the load and pressure on weakened muscles. Providing stability can dramatically decrease the risk of falls and provide much needed relief to those overworked muscles. Assistive devices include but are not limited to walkers, canes, crutches, wheelchairs, orthotics (braces of one type or another) voice activated software for computers and activities of daily living equipment.

Recently Jane, a 48-year old polio survivor, was seen in our clinic. She is a nurse in one of the busiest hospitals in Boston. When she first arrived, she was struggling with decreased energy and back pain. She was not using any device while ambulating. The physical therapist prescribed Lofstrand crutches and the patient reported less stress on her body with walking and decreased fatigue. Although, initially quite reluctant to use a device, she experienced less pain and increased endurance when walking with the forearm crutches.

It is important that polio survivors feel comfortable with what is being prescribed and the rationale behind the piece of equipment. I often state to the polio survivor that electricity and technology are their friends. If the polio person is “shrinking their world” due to difficulty with walking or standing for more than a few minutes, then assistive aids can really make a difference. Although you may feel dependent on this new piece of equipment, it will provide you with stability and potentially decrease energy expenditure to allow you to enjoy the activities that are important to you.

### ***What are the advantages and disadvantages of a power wheelchair vs. a three-wheel scooter?***

This is a common question we receive in our clinic. Most of our clients are much more willing to consider use of a scooter than a wheelchair. However, a three-wheel scooter may not always be the best for you. A power wheelchair is ideal for use in the home as it has a small turning radius. If a person has trunk, neck or arm problems, there are many modifications available. Power wheelchairs also offer more stability for the arms especially if one is diagnosed with carpal tunnel syndrome or ulnar neuropathy. The hand control placement can be changed if there is upper body weakness. There are also more seating options when purchasing a power chair. It is easier to access a table or desk when using a power chair. Power wheelchairs are

also used in the community, on both level and unlevel surfaces. The main disadvantages with a power chair are that they are heavier than a scooter and a scooter is more compact and foldable.

A scooter comes in a variety of sizes and often feels less “medicinal” and offers more of a sporty look. A scooter is easily foldable allowing for easy storage. A three-wheel scooter will offer more agility and smaller turning radius than a four wheel scooter, but not as small as a power chair. A scooter works well in the community but not as well in the home due to the larger turning radius and the need to make a K turn. If the goal is for outside occasional use and you are not experiencing any problems with your neck, trunk or arms, then a scooter may be for you.

It is important that you meet with a therapist and a vendor that specializes in power mobility. Many rehabilitation hospitals have wheelchair clinics where you can try various models. Avoid just meeting with a vendor. The therapist and vendor work in conjunction to make sure the equipment prescribed is ideal for your needs.

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