

Factors for Choosing Adaptive Equipment

Adaptive equipment refers to any device that helps someone with a disability perform daily tasks or self-care activities.

“People sometimes have a limited view of adaptive equipment,” says Echo Presgraves, an occupational therapist at the MDA ALS Care Center at Johns Hopkins Hospital. “Many think of large purchases, but it can be as small as getting a home button more raised on a smart phone to something like a reclining shower seat. Adaptive equipment is a broad term, but it’s truly about helping a person adapt to their environment or abilities.”

Echo often does assessments of adaptive equipment needs for those with neuromuscular disease, learning about the person’s strength, along with watching their movement and doing an interview to get a sense of their needs.

When it comes to choosing the right adaptive equipment, patients should take into consideration several factors, and providers are important resources for information that will help them make those decisions.

Echo advises starting with equipment that assists the start of the patient’s day. “Simple sock aids or shoehorns can make dressing that much easier,” she says. “There are even shoes that open in the back, shoes that open on the top, and elastic laces make putting on shoes easier.”

Before buying complex adaptive equipment, consider whether a low-cost option would work. For example, a support handlebar on a car door could make a big difference in helping a person get into and out of their car.

For sleep, Echo says adjustable beds can be a critical help before the need for a hospital bed. Placing a blanket lifter under the covers also makes it easier to roll over.

For any sizable purchase, patients should consider the potential longevity of the item. “For example, let’s say you’re talking about a big-ticket item like a stair lift,” she says. “You have to consider whether moving to a one-story home may be in the near future. If so, it may not make sense to make that buy right now.”

Though Echo doesn’t handle insurance coverage of equipment, she says insurance often only pays for mobility devices every five years, so if a person with a neuromuscular disease knows they’ll need a much more advanced item soon, they may not want to replace the item for just a small upgrade.

Echo also advises people to look for ways to test adaptive equipment before making a big purchase, such as loan closets. ([MDA’s Resource Center](#) can help families find [equipment loan resources](#).) “Families often donate their old items,” she says.

Echo stresses that people should do their homework and remember that the simplest equipment often can offer extra independence. “Just using a longer straw or a wide-handled utensil for feeding may be the difference in being able to have a meal without help,” she says. “It’s not always about a lot of money but just investigating what’s out there — and it seems like something new is always coming to the market.”