

# Independent Living Assistance

## Chairs: how to choose



Choosing a comfortable, supportive and functional chair requires careful consideration of a person's needs, preferences and the intended use of the chair. It is recommended when choosing a chair to sit in it for 10 mins or more. It is also recommended that the client is aware of good transfer techniques.

### Features to consider - lounge or dining chair

#### Environment:

A dining chair:

- should be stable in the environment it is used in
- needs to be light enough to be pushed out from the table with ease. If this is an issue a revolution chair may need to be considered.

An electric raiser / recliner chair:

- ensure there is adequate room to install the chair to fully raise & recline
- if the raising / reclining chair is electronically controlled, consider the distance and safety from the electrical point to the chair
- consider issues the client may encounter with changes in the environment such as a power blackout. Does the recliner / riser chair have battery back up? Does the client have a call alert?

#### Materials

Consider:

- comfort heat / cold & the effect of the material on the impact of changes to skin integrity
- continence requirements and cleaning of leather / fabric
- the need for arm / head covers to maintain the integrity of the material at the high use points
- that the foam density can be individualised

#### Seat height

Seat height is important as an appropriate seat height should allow the person to sit down and stand up as easily as possible.

- A qualified health professional could make some recommendations for you
- A measuring guide called the 'Stick-To-Stand' may be used to assist with setting the correct chair seat height for a person. As a general guide, when seated your hips should be slightly above the height of your knees, with your feet flat on the floor.
- Some types of chairs have legs that are adjustable in height. This allows the chair to be altered to the most suitable height for each user.
- If the chair does not have legs adjustable for height, chair-raising blocks can be placed under the four legs to raise the chair to an appropriate height
- A chair platform placed under all four legs can also raise the chair height
- It is important that the chair does not rock or recline when a chair platform is used to ensure stability of the chair for the user. Also, make sure the platform does not prevent the person in the chair from getting their toes under their knees when rising. It will make it difficult for them to stand.

#### Firm seat

The seat should be firm enough to make rising easier and to support good posture, yet still be comfortable.

#### Adequate seat depth

The seat should support the length of the buttocks and thighs. The front edge of the seat should curve downwards (often called a waterfall front), ending two or three finger widths behind the knees to avoid pressure on the calf muscles.

#### **Adequate seat width**

Seat width should allow enough space on either side of the body for the width of two to three fingers, but close enough for the armrests to remain comfortable.

#### **Supportive backrest**

The backrest should support the natural curves of the spine. A lounge chair should also provide support for the head and neck. Dining chairs need to assist in maintaining an upright posture.

#### **Armrests**

In a lounge chair, armrests should support under the forearm and hand, and be firm to assist pushing up to a standing position.

Armrest length and height for a dining chair should enable the chair to be pulled close to the table. The person's forearms should rest at about 90 degrees on the table.

Padded armrests may be more comfortable for some people.

#### **Foot rests**

The user's feet should be supported flat on the floor, or on a footrest when seated. Some footrests support the feet only, whilst others support the feet and lower legs. Raiser / Recliner armchairs can be made to measure.

#### **Chair types – to assist with sitting, standing and lifting:**

##### **Kitchen stool**

Has a padded back & seat designed for perching on while working in the kitchen or bench. It has height adjustable splayed legs for stability with arms to push up from.

##### **Dining / utility / day chairs**

Dining chairs are generally used to make eating, drinking and other tabletop activities easier. They usually come with armrests to facilitate transfers and are height adjustable.

##### **Revolution chair**

Has a unique patented "swivel slide" mechanism which allows easy access to the chair seat while

also allowing the chair seat to be brought closer to the table.

#### **Lounge chair**

Lounge chairs are commonly used to allow a person to relax or complete seated activities such as reading, watching television or talking to someone. These chairs can have high backs that can be contoured & padded armrests & are available with height adjustable legs.

#### **Electric lift and recline chairs**

- A range of electric chairs are available which provide push button options for reclining and raising the leg rest for comfort or elevating the seat into a semi standing position to assist with transfers. Some of these chairs can be reclined completely flat, creating a comfortable resting and sleeping position. It is advisable to use a leg rest when reclining the backrest to raise and support the legs and to avoid strain on the lower back.
- Single motor chairs cause the footrest to move outwards and upwards and the backrest to tilt back simultaneously. Chairs with two motors allow independent control of backrest, footrest and lift functions. Some chairs have a 'wall saver' mechanism, where the entire seat glides forward as the backrest reclines to avoid striking the wall or furniture behind the chair.
- Standard chair padding is made of foam. This may be customised on chairs with zippered cushions in the backrest. Some chairs feature airbags or water bladders that assists with reducing pressure and increasing comfort. Armrests should be firm enough to assist the user when pushing up to a standing position.
- The majority of chairs plug into a standard household power outlet with control of the chair on a remote which can be mounted on either side of the chair
- Many chairs feature a battery back up in the transformer. In the event of a power failure, the battery backup will provide sufficient

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power to lift the chair at least once. The battery should then be replaced.

#### Portable lifting cushions

Portable lifting cushions that use a pump system to assist a person to stand can be placed onto a variety of standard chairs. The person must still be able to initiate the movement into a standing position, but they are 'boosted' up by the cushion.

#### Office chairs

- If a number of people use the same chair, make sure the seat height, backrest height and position of the backrest in relation to the seat are easily adjustable
- Adjustment can be manual or gas powered
- Chair height should permit the user's forearms to be held comfortably at table height (with elbows at 90 degrees) and the lower back should be well supported. This may mean that a footrest is also required in order to support the feet and ankles.
- The back support should curve into the lower back and be slightly curved around the trunk. Some office chairs feature adjustable back contouring to better suit the user's posture.
- Some office chairs feature a 'free floating' backrest, which will move with the user and provide more constant back support as they lean forward and back.
- A seat that tilts forward can help maintain the natural curves of the back
- Seat bases that promote a forward tilt of the pelvis may also assist in relieving back pain
- A five point star base on castor wheels provides stability and mobility

#### Load capacity

The load capacity (also known as safe working load) varies widely between chairs and it is important for the user's safety that they only use chairs that will support their weight. A range of lounge, dining, lifting chairs and office chairs are available in a bariatric range.

#### Further information

An occupational therapist can provide information and advice on the most suitable chairs for your individual circumstances.

Through **My Aged Care** it is possible for older people to access Australian Government-subsidised services including a home assessment by an occupational therapist. For further information and to check eligibility, call 1800 200 422 or visit [www.myagedcare.gov.au/](http://www.myagedcare.gov.au/).

People under the age of 65 with a permanent disability who are **National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS)** participants and have Assistive Technology or Consumables funding approval may be eligible specialised household furniture if deemed necessary.

**Catalyst Foundation** (including Seniors Information Service) can help you to access useful resources and to locate equipment suppliers. Tel (08) 8168 8776 or email [information@catalystfoundation.com.au](mailto:information@catalystfoundation.com.au).

*The information contained here is general in nature and is not intended as health advice.*

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