GUIDE

Should I rent or buy a wheelchair?

Renting wins for a short recovery, buying wins when nothing is going back, and the deciding factor is your trajectory, not the weekly price.

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Rent or buy is usually the second question. The first one is how long this person is likely to need a wheelchair, and whether what they need is likely to stay the same. Answer that honestly and the rent or buy decision tends to answer itself.

It helps to treat a wheelchair as one step inside Mobility Adaptation, the ongoing process of changing equipment, support and routines as a person's needs change so they can continue moving safely, confidently and independently. Very few people need one chair for the rest of their life. Most people need the right chair for this stretch of it.

What renting is genuinely good at

Renting is the better answer more often than the industry likes to admit. It fits three situations well.

- **Short and defined need.** Recovery from surgery, a fracture, an illness with an expected end point. If the need has a horizon, buying a chair means owning something after the reason for it has gone.
- **Uncertain need.** Someone whose strength, stamina or diagnosis is still changing. Buying now locks in a guess about a body that has not settled.
- **A single trip or event.** A vacation, a wedding, an airport, a museum, a long day out. Renting at the destination avoids transporting a chair you will use for two days.

Rentals also move the maintenance to somebody else. Tires, brakes, casters and upholstery are the supplier's problem, and a chair that fails mid month is usually swapped rather than repaired at your expense.

The trade is fit. Rental fleets carry a narrow range of sizes, because a fleet has to suit as many people as possible. If the person you are renting for is very tall, very short, wider or narrower than average, or needs specific seating, a rental chair will often be approximately right rather than right.

What buying is genuinely good at

Buying earns its keep when the need is ongoing and the requirements are known. Two things come with ownership that rental rarely matches.

- **Fit.** Seat width, seat depth, back height, footrest length, armrest style, wheel position and cushion can all be chosen for one person rather than for a fleet. A chair that fits is used. A chair that does not fit sits in a hallway.
- **Weight and handling.** If somebody else lifts the chair into a car trunk several times a week, that lift is the whole experience. Lighter chairs and folding frames cost more, and that money is buying the carer's shoulders, not a feature.

Ownership also lets you plan. A chair you own can be adjusted, re-cushioned, or fitted with different wheels as circumstances change, which is exactly what adaptation looks like in practice.

When neither renting nor buying solves the problem

Sometimes the honest answer is that a wheelchair is not the thing that will help, and buying one will not fix what is actually wrong.

If someone is falling indoors, tiring in the kitchen, or avoiding the stairs, a wheelchair does not address any of that. Better lighting, a rail, a different chair to rise from, a change to the route through the house, or a strength and balance referral may do far more. If the difficulty is only over distance, a rollator with a seat often restores more independence than a wheelchair does, because the person keeps walking.

If the person will be seated for long periods, seating and cushion selection is a clinical matter and belongs with a physiotherapist or occupational therapist before it belongs with any retailer. We can supply the equipment. We cannot assess the person, and we will not pretend otherwise.

There is also the refusal case. A chair bought without the person's agreement is a chair that does not get used. That is not a product problem and no purchase will resolve it.

The cost comparison people get wrong

The usual comparison is monthly rental against purchase price, and the break even point is treated as the decision. Two things distort it. Insurance and public health schemes often treat rental and purchase differently, and the rules can depend on the type of chair, so check what is covered before comparing anything. And a bought chair that does not fit has an effective cost of the full price plus the replacement, which is the most expensive outcome available in this category.

What to measure, and what to ask

Before you rent or buy anything, get these written down.

- **Seat width:** hip to hip while seated, measured at the widest point, with usual clothing on.
- **Seat depth:** back of the hip to the back of the knee, with a small gap left behind the knee.
- **Lower leg length:** back of the knee to the floor, wearing the shoes they actually wear, for footrest height.
- **The person's weight** against the chair's stated capacity, and the **chair's weight** against whoever lifts it.

- **Doorways and the car:** narrowest doorway in the home, and the trunk opening the chair has to pass through.

Then ask the supplier: does the user push the chair themselves or is it pushed by someone else, is delivery and collection included, what happens if it breaks, can a rental be extended or ended early, does any rental payment count toward a purchase, and what is the return window if the fit turns out to be wrong.

If the need has an end date, rent. If it does not, buy the chair that fits the person in front of you, and expect to change something about it within a year or two. That is not a failed purchase. That is how adaptation works.

General information, not medical advice. If fit, posture, pressure relief or fall risk is part of your decision, speak to an occupational therapist.

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