

# Wheelchair considerations: After an amputation



All wheelchair users need a wheelchair that is safe and durable, provides proper fit and postural support and suits their local environment.



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## 1. Pressure risk

A large number of amputations are due to diabetes complications. Diabetes reduces sensation and blood flow, increasing the risk of pressure sores. For people with diabetes and amputation:

- Assess pressure risk carefully
- Provide a pressure relief cushion
- Check the overall wheelchair fit for other possible areas of high pressure, paying particular attention to their residual limb and/or foot.

## 2. Wheelchair set up

Clients with high or double amputations do not have the weight of their leg(s) to stop their wheelchair from tipping backwards<sup>1</sup>. Therefore:

- To improve the user's balance in the wheelchair and reduce the risk of tipping, position the rear wheel axle in the 'safe' position (behind the client's shoulders).
- For some users, as they gain confidence and experience, it may be possible to review the wheelchair set up and move the rear wheel axle position to a more active position.

For users with a below knee amputation, not using a prosthesis:

- Provide a stump board to avoid swelling, pressure and contractures of the residual limb.

## 3. Postural Support

Good postural support reduces fatigue and can help to prevent secondary complications. Ensure:

- The backrest, seat, cushion and footrests are all fitted correctly
- The height of the backrest does not interfere with shoulder movement when the user is propelling.
- Tension on canvas seats and backrest is maintained to avoid sagging.

## 4. Client Education

All wheelchair users benefit from learning how to use and look after their wheelchair. Information and skills of particular importance for people with diabetes are to:

- Wash, dry and inspect their remaining foot every day.
- Wear an appropriate shoe even when in the wheelchair.
- Check all areas of skin with reduced sensation for signs of pressure.

## Good mobility skills can enable people with an amputation to have greater independence.

Provide mobility skills training, ideally with the assistance of a peer trainer. Mobility skills training should include:

- Correct pushing technique (long circular push strokes).
- Propelling over different terrain.
- Managing obstacles (steps, kerbs, rough ground).
- Transferring in different situations.



When carrying out mobility skills training, remember to:

- Check the wheelchair set up (see Point 2) to ensure the wheelchair is not too 'tippy'. Adjust if needed.
- Provide a 'spotter' to make mobility skills practice safer. Propelling may feel different if the user is wearing a prosthesis – practise with and without.

Users may also use crutches or a walking frame and will benefit from gait training to use these effectively.