

## What's better - Scooter or Powerchair?

By Matt Abrahams

If you are a senior, you are constantly bombarded by advertisers eager to sell you a scooter or powerchair. Many of these late night TV commercials are keen to point how you can get one at no cost but never discuss what the differences are between a scooter and powerchair. Both can be partially paid by Medicare - let's find out which is the best fit for you.

Scooters are battery powered vehicles that have three or four wheels and are steered using a bicycle style handlebar (or tiller), which requires two hands. Generally, scooters work best for people who can walk but only very short distances. They are designed to travel up to 28 miles on a single charge. The batteries should be charged regularly once a week overnight and need to be replaced yearly.

Compared to powerchairs they are less expensive, lighter and have a larger turning radius - making them less maneuverable in tight spaces like elevators and bathrooms. In addition, the speed and other parameters can not be customized to the same extent as on a powerchair. Three wheel models are narrower, to get through doorways but offer less stability outdoors - they can tip over on a sharp turn. Some three wheeled models are easily disassembled, which enables you to transport the scooter in car trunk or on a plane.

Electric powerchairs or power wheelchairs are propelled with 12 volt batteries. They work well for people who cannot walk and have limited upper body control. A user with sufficient control of one hand can command a joy stick controller for a dramatic increase in mobility.

Because they are heavier than a scooter the travel distance is a little shorter (up to 25 miles on a single charge). The batteries should be charged regularly once a week overnight and need to be replaced yearly.

There are predominantly two classes of power wheelchairs: rear-wheel drives and mid-wheel drives. Rear-wheel drives have the potential to collapse for transport, have more basic electronic packages, larger turning radiuses hence they tend to perform better outdoors. Mid-wheel drives have a very small turning radius, and tend to perform better indoors.

Powerchairs usually come with a captain's chair (similar to those in a minivan) but can actually accommodate a variety of seating and positioning options and can be programmed for speed, tilt, etc. Along with this customization comes the price, they are typical three times the price of a scooter. They have a very small turning base make then much easier to get into a bathroom. In general powerchairs are harder to transport in a vehicle than a scooter, they require a vehicle lift or docking station.

The Insurance guidelines on qualifying a person for a scooter or power wheelchair are very similar. As a user, the best fit is going to be based on; upper extremity capability (hands, arms, shoulders), upper body stability, ability to transfer in and out of the mobility device, hand dexterity and seating needs.

Your decision should be based a consultation with your doctor, physical therapist and mobility professional. Beware of purchasing over the internet, you cannot test drive equipment (always a good idea) or get service. Also remember to take into consideration your home environment and whether you be transporting this vehicle in your car or van.

*Matt Abrahams is a mobility professional, with 14 years of experience in home medical equipment. For more information or questions, you can contact him through this website: [www.seating-mobility.com](http://www.seating-mobility.com)*

|               | Scooter   | Powerchair  |
|---------------|---|---|
| Advantages    | Less expensive  | Easier maneuvering in tight spaces like a bathroom stall  |
|               | Easier to transport   | More options for seating and positioning                  |
|               | Relatively light weight                                     | Can be programmed to the client's ability and environment |
|               |   |   |
| Disadvantages | Hard to maneuver in tight spaces like a bathroom stall      | More expensive  |
|               | Few options for speed control, seating and positioning, etc | Heavy   |
|               | More maintenance than a manual wheelchair                   | More maintenance than a scooter                           |