

Clothing Ideas for the Mobility Impaired

When your ability to walk is limited, you may need to find adaptive equipment to help you move about. Often health care professionals suggest use of adaptive equipment such as casts, canes, crutches, braces, scooters, and wheelchairs to make life easier. Your limitation may be temporary, as occurs with knee surgery, or permanent, as a result of a spinal cord injury or a disease.*

Regardless of your situation, you probably still want to look good. Appropriate, attractive clothing can improve your appearance and feelings of confidence and self-worth. This publication presents some ideas that will help you identify clothing that works well with adaptive equipment and also provides acceptable appearance, comfort, and safety. Specially designed clothing is seldom needed. You can bring the world of clothing alternatives to your doorstep by shopping Internet and catalog sources as well as local retail stores. Knowing clothing features to look for will help you get the most suitable clothing for your needs.

Types of Adaptive Devices

Health care professionals usually suggest adaptive devices to help you maintain a fairly normal lifestyle, whether your disability is temporary or permanent. Adaptive devices include canes, casts, braces, walkers, scooters, and wheelchairs. Each type comes in a variety of styles and weights that may have implications for your clothing choices.

Casts and braces. These immobilize a limb or joint so that it cannot slip

out of position during healing. Casts may be made of plaster to be removed only at the end of the healing period or other stiff materials that fasten on with Velcro® so they can be removed periodically. Plaster casts must be kept dry.

Implications for clothing

Clothes may go over or under casts and braces. Either way, consideration must be given to comfort and safety.

- Clothes that go over braces or casts must have wider dimensions.
- Clothes that go under braces may be more comfortable if they fit close (such as a rib or jersey knit), have a soft texture, and are absorbent.
- For warmth if using an arm brace, sling, or cast, cover up by tying a fashionable scarf or shawl around your shoulders.
- If you have a leg cast, the other leg and your feet may feel cold. For warmth, you might buy a pair of short socks and a pair of knee-length socks in matching colors, then use the short sock over the foot with the leg cast and the knee-length sock on the other leg.
- To protect a cast during a shower, it could be wrapped with a large plastic bag, such as a trash or cleaners bag, and “sealed” at each end with a small towel and rubber bands to keep water from getting inside under the cast.

Crutches, canes, and walkers.

These help you maintain balance and walk more easily. Canes may have grips that are shaped to fit your hand and may have three or four short legs at the base for stability at floor level. Four-legged walkers and crutches should be adjusted to fit so that hand grips are at a comfortable height.

Implications for clothing

- Leather gloves that fit well may help you maintain a better grip on a crutch, cane, or walker.
- Two-piece outfits with pants rather than skirts will probably be easier to manage.
- Long skirts or coats should be avoided because they could get tangled and cause a fall.
- Longer shirts or tops will prevent your tummy or back from being exposed if the crutches pull up your clothes during walking.
- Durable fabrics with some stretch may wear better because crutches put strain on fabrics at the underarm.

Scooters. Scooters are battery powered and may be three- or four-wheeled so they vary in turning radius (a smaller radius is better for tight spaces). Seats and support provided vary, but users must have control of back and arms to maintain balance and “drive” the scooter. Usually people using scooters can walk and move independently, but lack stamina or strength to walk long distances.

Implications for clothing

- Pants or mid-length skirts should be selected for their fit in a seated position, but allow for standing.
- Clothes should not be tight, but designed to fit moderately close to the body so as not to become entangled.
- Fabrics should be smooth to facilitate transfer from the scooter to a chair, for example, but not so slick as to foster sliding off a chair seat.
- Flat shoes may provide greater stability in transferring on and off the equipment.

- For cold weather, torso-length coats are easier to manage than long ones.
- Flannel-lined denim pants or ski pants could provide warmth and comfort for the legs.

Wheelchairs. Wheelchairs may be hand-powered or battery driven. The latter may be designed to be voice-activated or engaged by a switch with a very slight movement. Often persons able to use a hand-powered chair develop upper-body strength and strong muscles that are hard to fit with usual off-the-rack clothing. Whether you are actively employed away from home or only need to dress up on Sunday, having clothes that enhance your appearance and are appropriate for various occasions is important. Some of the ideas presented below apply to professional dress; others apply to at-home casual wear.

Implications for clothing

- Jackets, sweaters, and tops styled with raglan sleeves usually are fuller in the shoulders than those with set-in sleeves and may be more comfortable.
- Persons with well-developed arm and shoulder muscles may require a large-size jacket that needs alteration to fit comfortably at the waist. Call stores to inquire about free alteration.
- Jackets with shoulder pleats or center-back pleats allow a greater range of movement.
- Tops, jackets, and sweaters may be too long from shoulder to waist creating too much bulkiness at the waist. Shop for shorter styles or petite sizes, which are cut shorter.
- Tops and sweaters can also be cut off and hemmed to be shorter.
- Pants may pull down in the back (exposing hips), but be bulky in the lap. Specially cut pants with a lower front and higher back crotch-rise are designed to prevent this problem and

are available from catalog sources.

- Catheters and urinary pouches require more leg width in pants and skirts; look for styles with gathers or pleats that are fuller over the hips.
- In general, pants may be better than skirts which are often too short for modesty or so long that they get tangled in the chair's wheels.
- Roll-up styles or 3/4 length sleeves are better than regular long sleeves, which may be too long. Sweaters look fine with the cuffs turned up.
- Cuffs in woven fabrics may be too tight and require buttoning.
- If button styles are preferred, sew the buttons with elastic thread, so the sleeve-cuff can be slipped on.
- Front or side openings are easier to manage than back openings.
- Pull-over knit styles may work if a person has full arm and head control. Neck openings should be large enough to slip on comfortably.
- Sweatshirt fleece or velour outfits are warm and comfortable for casual wear. They usually have sufficient roominess to accommodate special devices such as catheters and bags.
- Elastic waists and cuffs may be easier to manage, but elastic should not be tight or bind and restrict circulation.
- Smooth fabrics for pants or skirts help you slide easily when transferring from your chair to another seat.

Other clothing problems

Hand tremors may make it difficult to eat or drink without spills that soil your clothes. Mealtime can be more pleasant if you plan for this.

- Large terrycloth or absorbent quilted protectors (bibs) are helpful.
- Prints and patterns in clothing fabrics do not show soil as easily.
- Durable, washable fabrics, such as polyester/cotton blends are easy to clean up.

Incontinence, or loss of bladder/bowel control, is very common, but many clothing options are available to help you be comfortable and retain dignity.

- Gowns with back openings so they can be spread apart when you're seated, but hang closed when you stand. This feature helps reduce laundering and provides modesty.
- Absorbent pads or seat covers for chairs, whether disposable or reusable with laundering are useful.

Arthritis with loss of manual dexterity can be less problematic with attention to clothing details.

- Substitute Velcro® closures for buttons.
- Add yarn pull-tabs to zippers.
- Avoid fabric-covered buttons that are difficult to fasten.

For further ideas on clothing for special needs, go to:
<http://www.extension.iastate.edu/Pages/pubs/cl.htm>
 See:

- Clothing Ideas publication series
 - *Consumer Choices: Clothing ideas for people with special needs*, PM 570
- Also go to: <http://www.iastate.edu/~tc-ext/disabled.html>
 See: *Consumer Choices: Selecting clothes for older people in your care*, PM 684

* A Few Causes of Disabling Conditions is a fact sheet outlining some common causes and characteristics of personal disabilities that have implications for clothing. This fact sheet may be useful to Textiles and Clothing students, 4-H'ers and others who lack medical background, but are interested in adaptive clothing. It is found online at the Clothing Idea URL given above.

Textiles and Clothing 10

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