



## **The Rehabilitation Approach to Adaptive Devices and Equipment and Techniques**

While ALS can result in muscle weakness that interferes with speaking, walking and/or other activities of daily living (ADL's), adaptive devices and equipment can assist you with: staying as independent as possible, helping you to conserve your energy and allowing you to partake in your daily living activities. Most people with ALS find that using a number of adaptive devices and durable medical equipment assists them in being safe and functional in performing their ADL's, mobility, and communication.

There are a wide variety of devices that can make your life easier; from very simple tools that make managing buttons and zippers easier or help with showering to sophisticated power wheelchairs. In fact, sometimes people with ALS and their families create their *own* devices to make life easier.

There are certain people on your health care team who have the skills and knowledge to assist you with your rehabilitation needs. It is important to first acknowledge, however, the two most important members on your team, the person with ALS and the caregiver(s) of an individual with ALS.

The most important member of the team is the **person with ALS**. It is *your* needs and desires that shape the whole process of what you receive in terms of equipment, information and techniques. The more you express your needs and desires, the more effectively the team will be able to provide you with appropriate interventions. The next most important member of the team is your **caregiver(s)**. Your caregiver(s) is very involved in providing some or much of the care that you need, and is able to bring valuable insight into how realistic the interventions that are discussed may be.

Depending on where you obtain your health care services, you will have access to varying interdisciplinary health care professionals. As a result, you may find that you encounter some or all of the following rehabilitation team members:

**Physician:** Your primary family physician may refer you to a physician who has specialized in the care of persons with ALS. **Neurologists** and **physiatrists** (Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation physicians), for example, often make referrals to the other team members who can assist you in making decisions about appropriate equipment. Your physician's signature is always needed on prescriptions for specific equipment that may be covered by insurance. Usually the prescription is written by the team and then reviewed and signed by the physician.

**Occupational Therapist (OT):** An occupational therapist evaluates, on an on-going basis, how your ADL's have been affected by ALS and determines new ways to help you maintain independence in your daily routines. Your occupational therapist's knowledge of aids for daily living can help to





maintain your independence in such areas as eating, dressing, bathing, meal preparation, driving and working skills. An OT is also adept at recommending home modifications to help maintain your normal activities. Often, simple changes such as removing scatter rugs or inside doors, adding ramps, and placing grab bars in the bathroom can improve your ability to get around safely in your home with more independence.

**Physical Therapist (PT):** A physical therapist evaluates, on an on-going basis, how your mobility has been affected by ALS and determines appropriate methods and equipment to promote safe and functional ambulation/mobility. The PT will evaluate and train you in transferring from one location to another, such as from chair to bed *or* wheelchair to car, and in using certain devices to compensate for any weakness in your arms or legs. The PT will also teach you and your caregiver(s) range-of-motion exercises to prevent stiff and painful joints. Based on the PT's evaluation, they will recommend suitable mobility devices such as a manual or power wheelchair.

**Orthotist:** Orthotists (along with the PT) evaluate your ability to walk and your need for orthotics. Orthotics, such as an ankle foot orthosis (AFO), other braces or splints, are devices that are used to assist you with movement, aligning your joints and preventing injuries. These devices increase support of your arms, hands, legs and feet and prevent painful and stiff joints and also reduce tripping and falling.

**Speech and Language Pathologist (SLP):** A speech and language pathologist specializes in the evaluation and treatment of speaking and swallowing problems. The speech and language pathologist can recommend certain ways to improve your speech and swallowing if those are areas where you are experiencing weakness. The SLP can also recommend and train you in the use of alternative and augmentative communication (AAC) devices to help you to better communicate, if needed. It is important to continue to enable your communication abilities, even if your speech muscles are weakened and an AAC device may be needed. AAC devices can range from very simple and inexpensive, such as a letter board or ETRAN (clear plastic board with clusters of letters used to spell out words to those you are communicating with), to highly sophisticated, computerized systems that include environmental controls such as the Dynavox.

**Social Worker:** A social worker can assist you with determining what types of devices and equipment are covered by your insurance. In some instances, a social worker may even be able to assist you in contacting your insurance representative to advocate for payment. Medicare and private insurance companies will pay for *certain* devices and equipment, if deemed medically necessary. However, there are certain items that are generally *not* covered by Medicare and other insurances, such as most bathroom equipment. It is important to remember that insurance plans can vary widely,



so it is important to check with your carrier regarding what items are covered. For individuals who have no insurance coverage for such devices, a social worker can work with you to determine if there are other resources available in your community that are available for you to access.

**Rehabilitation Technology Supplier (RTS):** The rehabilitation technology supplier (or vendor) provides the durable medical equipment and is specifically trained in rehabilitation equipment. *It is recommended that you see a member or members of your rehabilitation team before contacting a vendor, so that you have a better idea of the type of device or equipment suited especially for you.*

As you can see, rehabilitation professionals can assist you in the complicated and ongoing process of determining the appropriate adaptive devices and equipment needed to meet your needs. All members of the team bring a different perspective to your care. You, as the person with ALS, direct the team by sharing what you want and need. For more information on adaptive devices and equipment, please contact a rehabilitation professional in your clinic or discuss your needs with your physician.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact The ALS Association at 1-888-782-4747, or at [alsinfo@alsa-national.org](mailto:alsinfo@alsa-national.org).

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