GUIDE

How hard is it to push a wheelchair, every day, on your route?

Before you buy an attendant chair, check whether the person doing the pushing can manage the hills, curbs and distance they will actually face.

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A wheelchair is easy to push in a showroom. Showroom floors are flat, smooth, level and short. Your route is none of those things. It is a sidewalk lifted by tree roots, a curb cut that was never quite flush, a car park with a gradient the architect described as negligible, and the last stretch to the door across gravel. The question that matters is not how a chair feels for a few meters indoors. It is how it feels on the same journey, twice a day, in February.

This is a mobility adaptation question rather than a purchase question. What you are choosing is not a chair, it is how a particular person moves along a particular route this year, knowing that both the person and the route will change.

Effort is mostly a route problem

Pushing effort comes from four things, roughly in this order of importance: the gradient, the surface, the cross-slope of the ground, and the combined weight of the occupant and the chair. Specifications describe only the last of those, which is why a specification sheet is a poor predictor of how tired someone will be at the end of the week.

Gradient dominates everything. On a slope, the pusher is lifting weight, not just moving it, and no equipment choice removes that work. It can be shared, reduced or shortened, but it cannot be designed away.

Surface does more than specification

Rolling resistance rises sharply as surfaces get softer and less even. Smooth asphalt is easy, worn sidewalk is harder, brick pavers are harder again, and grass, gravel or sand can be genuinely exhausting. The parts of the chair that decide how it copes are the ones people ignore when comparing models:

- **Front caster diameter.** Small casters are neat and turn tightly, but they drop into cracks and expansion joints that larger casters ride over. If your route has broken sidewalk, larger casters are usually the single most useful change.
- **Tire type.** Pneumatic tires deform over bumps and roll better on rough ground, at the cost of needing pressure checked. Solid tires never puncture and never need attention, and they transmit more of the route into the occupant and into your arms.
- **Tire pressure.** A pneumatic tire that is soft is enormously harder to push than the same tire at its correct pressure. Many chairs that feel heavy are simply underinflated.

Camber, the tax nobody mentions

Sidewalks are built with a cross-slope so that rain drains into the road. On a long sidewalk, the chair drifts steadily downhill toward the curb, and the pusher corrects it continuously. The effort is small at any one moment and considerable over a mile. It is felt in one wrist and one shoulder rather than in both, so it is often reported as a shoulder problem rather than a route problem. If someone tells you the walk to the store hurts on the way there but not on the way back, camber is the likely reason, because they are correcting against the opposite side on each leg.

Weight matters, and usually less than the brochure suggests

Frame weight is real and worth having, particularly for lifting the chair into a car trunk, which is often the part that actually injures people. But on the route itself, the occupant is normally the larger share of the total mass, so the difference between a lightweight frame and a standard one is a modest percentage of what you are pushing. Buy a lighter frame for the trunk and the doorway. Do not expect it to transform a hill.

When buying something will not fix this

If the route includes a sustained slope, if the pusher has back, wrist or shoulder trouble, or if the pusher is themselves in their eighties, no chair on the market solves this, and it is more honest to say so than to sell you a lighter one. What helps in those cases is changing the journey rather than the equipment: parking closer even if it costs more, using the level route that takes longer, splitting the trip, arranging for someone else to do the outbound leg, or moving the activity to a venue with better access. Equipment cannot make a hill flat. Sometimes the correct answer is that this route should not be walked at all, and that is a legitimate result of asking the question properly.

Power assist, described honestly

Powered assistance, whether a powered wheel or an attendant control, genuinely addresses gradient and distance in a way no passive chair can. It also adds weight to the thing you lift into the car, adds a battery to charge and maintain, and adds cost. It is a good answer to a hill and a poor answer to a rough surface, which is better solved by casters and tires.

What to measure, and what to ask

- **Walk the route without the chair.** Note every slope, every change of surface, every curb, and where the sidewalk leans.
- **Measure the narrowest point:** the front door, the bathroom door, the gap between the parked cars. Measure the doorway, not the door.
- **Weigh the trunk lift.** Ask the pusher to lift the folded chair once, before agreeing to do it daily.
- **Ask the supplier:** what is the caster diameter, are the tires pneumatic or solid, what is the total weight and the weight of the heaviest single part once dismantled, and what is the stated user weight limit for this specific model.

- **Ask about the future:** can this chair take a power assist later, and can the seat width or backrest be changed if needs change.
- **Try it on your worst surface,** not on a shop floor. A supplier who will not allow that is telling you something useful.

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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