

## Scooters: selecting a mobility scooter

Motorised mobility scooters (also called 'gophers') are often used by people who find it difficult to walk or propel a wheelchair over long distances. There are many brands and models available and it is important to understand the features and differences between various scooters before purchasing.



### Scooter Selection

Scooter selection requires careful consideration of the following:

- The type and features of the scooter
- The user's physical skills and abilities (for example, balance, weight, strength, reflexes, ability to transfer, finger movement and control)
- The user's cognitive, behavioural, perceptual and visual skills (for example, is the user aware of their own and other's safety?)
- The environments in which the scooter will be used (for example, outdoors/indoors, steep areas, rough ground, distances, storage)
- Transport needs (for example, will the scooter need to be dismantled for transport, suitable for public transport requirements?)
- Is a scooter the most appropriate option (for example, would a powered wheelchair be more suitable)?

Assessment and consideration of these areas will help to determine the type of scooter required, whether a three or four-wheeled scooter is appropriate, and what options and accessories are needed. It is advisable to consult a health professional to decide if a scooter is suitable.

To operate a scooter safely, the user must have adequate hearing, vision, concentration, memory, reaction time, ability to plan movements, judgement of speed and awareness of safety in crowded areas. The user also needs to be able to safely transfer on and off the scooter and have adequate sitting balance and upper limb function to manage the tiller style of controls.

### Scooter Features

- **Size:** Due to their size and longer wheelbase when compared to wheelchairs, scooters are generally more suited to outdoor use, although there are some compact models available that are more appropriate for indoor use. Some of the smaller, more lightweight models can be dismantled into smaller components for transportation.

Other models will fold up into a smaller unit which may have wheels to pull the scooter along similar to pulling along a suitcase. Mid-size to larger scooters generally include features such as suspension, larger motors and longer lasting batteries to enable use over longer distances and rougher terrain.

- **Three versus Four Wheels:** Four-wheeled scooters may feel more stable over uneven terrain, and generally have a larger turning circle when compared to three-wheeled scooters, making them more suitable for outdoor use. Three-wheeled scooters are more manoeuvrable and due to their smaller turning circle may be more suitable for use in indoor spaces. They also may have more leg room on either side of the tiller. The overall stability of either a three- or four-wheeled scooter is also affected by how safely it is driven. That is, not turning the scooter too sharply or taking slopes at an angle.
- **Tiller:** This is the central post or steering column which features the driving controls of the scooter. It is often adjustable to provide easier access to the controls and allow more room for larger users.
- **Suspension:** Users who are sensitive to bumps/jolts or who are driving over uneven terrain will find suspension important. Not all scooters feature suspension.
- **Tyres:** Are usually pneumatic (air-filled), which may provide a cushioned ride. Others have micro-cellular or puncture-proof (solid) tyres, requiring less maintenance but a bumpier ride. Larger tyres provide increased ground clearance and are more suitable for use over uneven terrain.
- **Controls:** A lever operated by either fingers or thumbs usually controls forward acceleration and reverse functions. One side of the lever operates forward acceleration and the other operates reverse. On some scooters, a single lever combines forward acceleration and reverse for one-handed operation. Lever extensions are available on some models. Occasionally, on some scooter models, alternative style of controls may be featured, such as a throttle-style of control positioned on a handlebar support. The control panel includes a speed dial or touch button which allows the scooter speed to be altered to suit the environment and/or the skills of the user. The panel may also include buttons or switches to operate a horn, indicator lights, headlight(s), hazard lights, and also contains a battery level indicator and ignition.
- **Ignition:** Usually consists of a key or a plug located on the tiller. A scooter cannot be driven once the key or plug is removed. A free-wheeling lever can disengage the motors if the scooter needs to be pushed manually.
- **Brakes:** Usually are electromagnetic and activated automatically when the control lever is released. Some scooters also have a manual lever hand-brake as an additional safety feature. Occasionally some models of scooter do not feature electromagnetic braking and braking must be performed manually by the user, by squeezing a hand-brake mounted either side of the tiller.
- **Motors:** Differ in size and capacity, which affects the performance and speed of the scooter. According to current laws, compliant powered mobility devices are not permitted to travel faster than 10 km per hour in public areas. Larger motors will be required for rough or hilly terrain.
- **Batteries:** Usually consist of two dry or wet cell batteries (most are dry cell), which can vary in size, power and range. Some models of scooters feature lithium ion batteries, which are lighter in weight and may last longer than other

batteries. Batteries are rated in amp hours, which, in combination with the efficiency of the motor, provide a guide as to the distance the scooter can travel before requiring recharging. Scooter batteries need to be charged regularly to keep them working efficiently.

- **Battery chargers:** Are either on-board (in-built) or off-board as a separate item. In-built chargers are incorporated into the scooter with a power cord that is used to connect the scooter to a mains power point. Off-board (separate) chargers have a charging box with cords to connect the charger to the scooter and a mains power point. Off-board chargers keep the overall weight of the scooter down and may be less likely to fail, as they are not subject to scooter vibrations, which on-board chargers are. They can also be substituted easily if required. Location of the charging point varies between scooters, some are low to the ground and others are located near the control panel. Some chargers may be able to remain connected to the battery when the scooter is not in use and will not overcharge or damage the battery. It is important to check with the manufacturer/supplier battery charging procedures for the specific scooter.
- **Seats:** Are usually contoured and padded with vinyl or fabric upholstery. Some are height adjustable and may have a forward and backward adjustment to improve access to the tiller or to provide more legroom. The level of support provided in the seat will vary amongst scooter models. Some seats swivel, locking every 45 degrees, to aid in transfers.
- **Armrests:** May be height-adjustable and may flip up to assist in transfers.
- **Backrests:** Are usually contoured and padded. Backrest height will vary amongst models. Options may include a height-adjustable headrest and a lever-operated recline function that may also allow the backrests to be folded down onto the seat to make transportation easier.
- **Leg room/foot support:** Some scooters allow the user to put their feet beside the wheels or on top of the wheels. This may be a good option for users with longer legs or reduced ability to bend their knees.
- **Safety features:** May include anti-tip wheels, low battery warning light, automatic speed reduction in reverse or when turning, and a reverse beeper.

## Accessories

Optional accessories may include front and rear bags and baskets, oxygen bottle carriers, light kits, seat/lap belts, walking frame, walking stick and crutch holders, sun canopies, anti-tip wheels, mirrors, dust covers, safety/visibility flags.

## Additional Factors

There are many other factors to consider when purchasing a scooter, including:

- **Cost:** Scooter prices range greatly. Some services, organisations and community groups offer financial assistance, and there is a second-hand market for scooters. Other costs include ongoing maintenance and servicing costs.
- **Warranty/guarantee:** Consider the terms, lengths and conditions.
- **Parts:** Ask the scooter supplier if parts are readily available if required.
- **Load capacity:** Scooters differ in their load capacity (or safe working load). It is important to ensure that the scooter selected can take the user's weight.

- **Turning circle:** Scooters with a long and/or wide wheelbase have a very large turning circle. It is important to think about the turning space required.
- **Environment:** Choice of scooter can depend on where and how far the user wants to drive the scooter (for example, indoors, outdoors or both), and if the scooter can manage the terrain.
- **Storage:** The scooter will need to be parked and stored in a sheltered area with access to a power point for charging.

## Transporting a Scooter

If a scooter needs to be transported, consider the following:

- Disassembly: some scooters can be dismantled for transportation in a vehicle. It is advisable to determine if the user, or carer, can manage this, as some scooter components can be heavy.
- Safety requirements exist around transport of scooter batteries particularly if travelling on an aeroplane. Specific requirements would need to be confirmed with the airline carrier as well as the manufacturer/supplier of the scooter.
- What type of vehicle will be used? Is the boot big enough to take the scooter? Does it have relevant safety features such as tie down straps or barrier cages?
- Is there a need to consider other equipment? A range of devices such as lifters, carriers, trailers and ramps can be used to assist in transporting a scooter.

If transporting a scooter in an accessible taxi, the user must be able to independently transfer off the scooter and into a seat in the taxi.

## Contacting the Independent Living Centre

For further information or to make an appointment to visit the display please contact the Independent Living Centre. The Independent Living Centre offers free advice on equipment and techniques to help you with everyday tasks.

Independent Living Centre  
11 Blacks Road  
Gilles Plains SA 5086

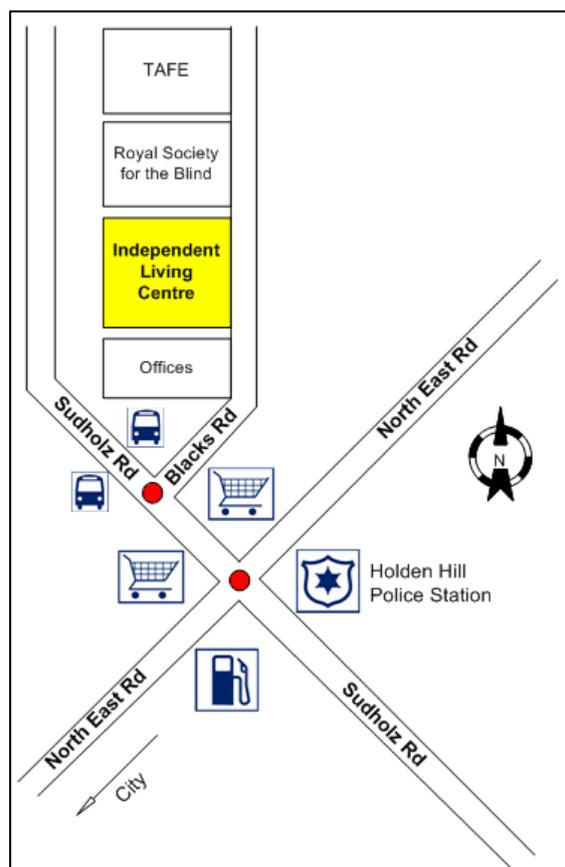
Phone: 1300 885 886 (SA & NT callers only) or 8266 5260

Email: [ilcsa@sa.gov.au](mailto:ilcsa@sa.gov.au)

Website: [www.sa.gov.au/disability/ilc](http://www.sa.gov.au/disability/ilc)

Accessible off street parking is available.

Bus services run nearby. Call 8210 1000 for timetable information.



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