

On your scooter

Mobility scooters offer independence to people with a limited ability to get around — but you need specific skills to use one.

IN A NUTSHELL

■ Hand strength, balance, good vision and hearing, and the ability to concentrate and react appropriately are some of the skills you need to drive a mobility scooter.

■ Independent Living Centres (ILC) around Australia can help you decide whether you have the skills to use a scooter. You can also trial scooters at an ILC — see Useful contacts, page 34.

Maybe you're finding it hard to get to the shops, or feeling exhausted just walking around the home. Or you've got a friend, partner or parent who's losing their independence and confidence because of mobility problems. A mobility scooter may be just the thing.

Mobility scooters are for people mobile enough to operate a vehicle but challenged when walking distances, either because of a disability or a health problem. Scooters have three or four wheels, with models ranging from small, compact vehicles for indoors, to bigger scooters for whizzing round your local shops, to large models designed to handle rougher terrains. They're battery-powered and steered by a tiller or handlebars.

IS IT A CAR? A BIKE? NO, IT'S ...

Most mobility scooters are designed to travel on a footpath, like a pedestrian. They're not classed as vehicles if their speed limit is less than 10 km/h and they don't need to be registered except in Queensland, where registration is free. Any scooter capable of exceeding 10 km/h does require a licence and registration in all states.

In Queensland, you need a medical certificate to prove the scooter is for mobility purposes. The scooter also needs to be inspected before use in Queensland, but not in other states. Check the section for pedestrians in the Australian Road Rules before using a scooter outside (you'll find them online on your state's department of transport website, or go to the National Transport Commission at www.ntc.gov.au and click on it under Quick Links on the left side of the page).

Currently, Australian regulations governing mobility scooters only concern the speed limit, but the standards are being updated. Some experts worry that people lacking the necessary skills to use a scooter may get one anyway because there are no licensing requirements. Another issue is use



by people whose weight exceeds the scooter's limit, which can damage the scooter and make it unsafe.

IS IT FOR ME?

Before rushing out and buying a scooter, make sure the person intending to use it has the necessary physical and cognitive skills to operate and manoeuvre it safely. Levels of vision and hearing and the ability to get on and off the scooter should also be considered. While very few, there have been injuries and even deaths involving mobility scooters, so don't get on one unless you can operate it competently.

An occupational therapist or doctor can help assess a potential rider's ability, but here's a list of attributes you need:

- Enough hand strength and movement to use the controls, steer and turn the scooter. You also need to be able to turn your head to look to the side and behind you.
- Balance when riding on bumpy or rough ground, and the ability to sit for periods of time and change the position of your body when going up and down inclines.
- Good enough vision and hearing to notice



vehicles and pedestrians approaching, and to judge distances.

■ The ability to concentrate for the entire period you drive and to react quickly enough to stop and turn suddenly if necessary. You also need to remember safety procedures and exercise patience, especially in crowded areas such as around shopping centres.

Check with your healthcare practitioner if you're taking any kind of medication to see if it affects your ability to operate machinery — if it does, talk to the Independent Living Centre in your state about alternatives to a scooter (see *Useful contacts*, page 34).

UNBIASED ASSISTANCE

As well as having your skills assessed you can get assistance choosing your scooter from healthcare workers such as an occupational therapist, an aged care assessment team or a community healthcare worker.

The Independent Living Centre can help a would-be rider consider their ability to use a scooter. It also has some scooters for trial at its centres. Some ILC have a mobile service that visits outside

metropolitan areas. Alternatively, check out the ILC online or phone it for help.

Find a supplier who'll let you try out the scooter where you'll be using it. Most of the suppliers we contacted let people take the scooter home for a short trial, or hire the scooter out to a potential buyer to try. One company even deducts the hire cost from the price of the scooter if you buy it. Some also hire out mobility scooters for short periods — for example, for someone who's recovering after an operation. Call the Independent Living Centre for its database listing suppliers that hire out scooters, or you can ring a supplier direct.

HIT THE PAVEMENT

Assuming you've established you or the person you're buying for can use the scooter, think about where it's going to be used, so you know what kind to purchase. (See *What to look for*, page 34).

Scooters are intended as an aid to mobility but not as a person's sole means of transport. So if the scooter's to be taken out for longer trips, check you or the person using it can get it onto public transport — ring and find out if your local transport has low-floor ramps — and that they can get help to put it into a taxi or car. In some states, public transport won't take three-wheeled scooters due to their instability.

The next thing to consider is storage. Many users house their scooter in a carport or garage, or in the house if it's for home mobility. Access to a power point is essential, as mobility scooters run on rechargeable batteries (which should be charged daily).

AFTER YOU'VE BOUGHT IT

Experts say a scooter ought to be serviced once a year, or more often if it's used frequently. Check if your supplier provides after-sales service — far more convenient than having your scooter sent away for repairs.

Scooters and safety

- Use a safety flag, high enough above your head to be easily visible.
- Install and use rear-view mirrors.
- Don't exceed the legal speed limit — 10 km/h.
- Use sun protection when travelling outdoors.
- Avoid driving at night, but if you must, use lights and reflectors.
- Plan your route before travelling, avoiding busy roads, intersections and roundabouts. Ride on the footpath wherever possible.
- Never stop on or drive your scooter up or down inclines greater than it's designed to handle, as it can tip over.
- Don't drink and ride!

REPORT: Mobility scooters

Before each trip, check the horn works, the tyres are pumped up and the batteries are fully charged. Keep batteries charged when the scooter's not in use. Your batteries should last about two to four years before you need to buy new ones (providing you look after them).

Prior to buying, also find out what kind of warranty your scooter has — we found a range from 12 months to three years, with two years for the scooter and one year for batteries being the most common. Some suppliers give different warranties for different parts of the scooter, so make sure you're aware of what's covered and for how long.

Insurance is another necessary cost. As mobility scooters aren't classed as motor vehicles you can't get vehicle insurance for them. Not all the insurers we spoke to cover them, but most that do recommend owners add the scooter to their home contents insurance, while some have a separate policy covering mobility scooters. You'll have to ring around to find what cover is available in your state, and check the policy carefully to ensure it covers personal and property damage your mobility scooter may cause you or others, and that you're covered outside your home and on public footpaths.

SCOOTERS AND SHOPPING

Many large shopping centres now lend scooters to patrons for a couple of hours while they're shopping. It's advisable to call the centre's customer service centre in advance to book one.

All the shopping centres we spoke to offer them as a free service. In most cases you need to fill in a 'hire' agreement form and leave some kind of identification while you use the scooter. Read the form carefully — by signing it you may find you've agreed to take responsibility for any injuries or breakages you may cause.

FINANCES

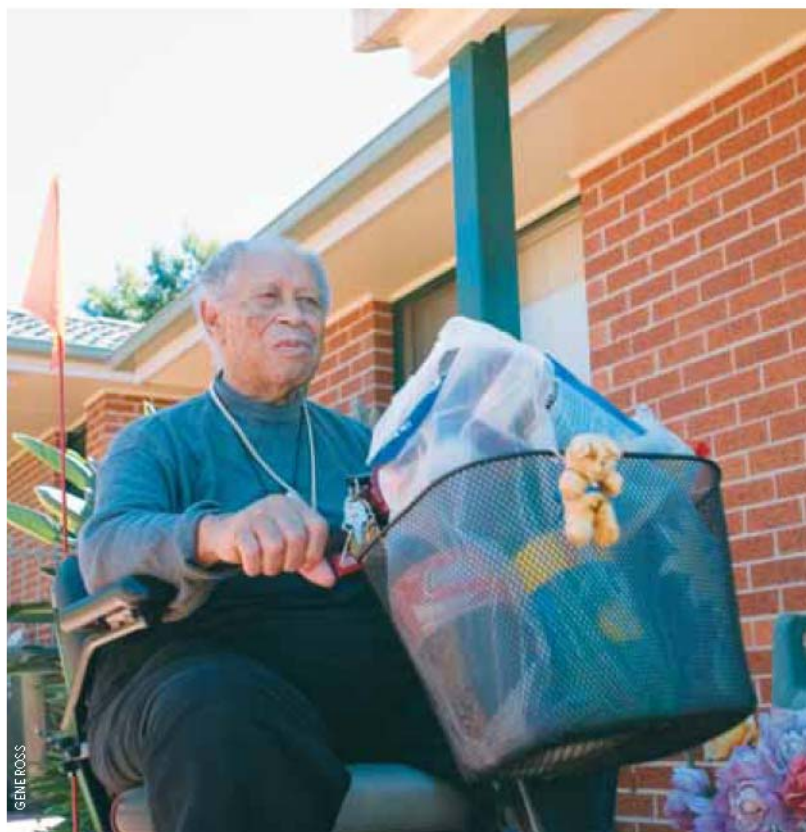
Our research found scooters ranging in price from \$1500 for a very light one that would probably be suitable for indoor use, to \$6800 for something designed for use outside.

Limited financial assistance for people buying aids and equipment for disabilities is available (see *Useful contacts*). You could also try contacting a charity such as Rotary and Lions Clubs, which may raise funds for the person needing the scooter. ■

What to look for

Make a checklist of your needs before shopping around. Consider:

- Where the scooter will be used. If indoors, a smaller one with a reasonable turning circle is likely to be best. If it's mostly outdoors, you'll need something sturdier, especially if you'll be travelling over bumpy or hilly ground.
- Decide what other features you'd like on your scooter, such as a basket, a canopy for weather protection or a walking-stick holder.
- Other equipment, such as an electrically operated loader to lift a scooter into the car, is also available.



Useful contacts

■ The Independent Living Centre: phone 1300 885 886 and you'll be transferred to the centre in your state, or go to www.ilcaustralia.org.

■ Financial assistance:

We've been told funding is only given for mobility scooters in exceptional circumstances. If you wish to find out more, though, call the department of health in your state:

ACT: ACT Equipment Scheme, phone 13 22 81.

New South Wales: The Program of Appliances for Disabled People (PADP), phone (02) 9391 9000.

Northern Territory: The Territory Independence and Mobility Equipment Scheme, phone (08) 8951 6744.

Queensland: Medical Aid Subsidy Scheme (MASS), phone (07) 3234 0111.

South Australia: The Independent Living Equipment Program (ILEP), phone (08) 8266 5260; 1800 800 523 for country callers.

Tasmania: Community Equipment Schemes — phone north (03) 6348 7906, north-west (03) 6440 7093, south (03) 6222 7393.

Victoria: Aids and Equipment Program, phone (03) 9616 7777;

Transport Accident Commission (TAC), phone 1300 654 329.

Western Australia: Community Aids and Equipment Disability Program, phone (08) 9426 9200.

■ War veterans should enquire at the Department of Veterans' Affairs: phone 133 254.

■ Scooter lessons: Councils on the Ageing (COTA) have a booklet called *A Scooter Driver's Guide* and a scooter safety video. For more information go to www.cota-act.org.au/Livedrive/scooters.html.

■ Roadside repairs: Motoring organisations in each state (the AANT, NRMA, RAA, RACQ, RACT, RACV and RAC of WA) have roadside services for mobility scooters, and some offer this service free even if you aren't a member. Call your state's motoring organisation for more information.