WHEELCHAIRS: USE

1. Types of wheelchairs

A wide variety of wheelchairs for any need has recently become available due to the use of modern constructions and lightweight materials like carbon and titanium. Multiple control systems for electrically powered wheelchairs are available as well. Which wheelchair is suitable depends on several factors, most importantly on how it will be used.

1.1. Companion wheelchair

A companion wheelchair is a type of wheelchair that cannot be self-propelled. It is designed to transport people with severe, and often multiple, disabilities. This type of wheelchair is propelled by pushing the two handles attached to the wheelchair.

1.2. Manual wheelchair

A manual wheelchair is a type of wheelchair that can be self-propelled. It is designed to ensure that people can independently move around. The wheelchair is propelled manually by using the hoops attached to the wheels.

1.3. Powered wheelchair

An electrically powered wheelchair is a type of wheelchair that is propelled by means of an electric motor. It can be controlled by a joystick. There are different types of powered wheelchairs for both inside and/or outside use.

1.4. Specialised wheelchairs

There are also many types of specialised wheelchairs:

- beach wheelchair – a wheelchair with balloon wheels to be used on the beach
- shower chair – a wheelchair suitable to be used under the shower
- commode chair – a wheelchair designed for using the toilet. Most often a shower commode chair is used, combining the two functions
- aquatic wheelchair – a wheelchair suitable to be used in and around warm and moist environments like swimming pools and saunas
- bariatric wheelchair – a wheelchair with an extra wide seat and a weight capacity of 450kg. This type of wheelchair is often used for people who are obese.

2. Things to consider when choosing a wheelchair

Comfort is key when using a wheelchair. Every wheelchair is unique. It is important to find a wheelchair that meets your requirements. Useful features are:

- lightweight wheelchairs to make moving around easier;
- big wheels and detachable foot or leg supports to make transport easier;
- a padded seat and a firm backrest for higher comfort while seated;
- drum brakes to increase safety and reduce maintenance.

3. Kerbs and sidewalks

3.1. Going up a kerb

Always go up a kerb forwards. The companion uses his foot to push the anti-tilt bar forward and leans backwards with a straightened back. The front wheels tip upwards and the companion pushes the wheelchair up the kerb. If the foot supports are placed too low, they can hit the kerb. If so, adjust or detach them.

Never go up a kerb backwards! The seated person can slide out of the wheelchair and the foot supports can get stuck onto the kerb.

3.2. Going down a kerb

Always go down a kerb **backwards**. The companion only needs to keep the wheelchair under control and, at the end, tilt the front wheels upwards by pushing down on the anti-tilt bar with his foot.

Never go down a kerb **forwards**! The seated person can slide out of the wheelchair and the foot supports can get stuck onto the kerb.

4. Using your wheelchair on the road

Mobility is a basic right for everyone and is essential for the social life and personal development of every individual. Every individual on the road, regardless of age, physical ability or means of transport, needs to be able to travel safely.
Wheelchairs are one of the aids guaranteeing personal mobility. On 15 March 2007, the relevant regulations

were amended. Wheelchairs have since been categorised under a new type of vehicle: the mobility devices.

Where is a wheelchair supposed to be driven?

This is determined by its upper speed limit. If the wheelchair does not exceed walking speed, it will fall under the same category as a pedestrian. It should therefore be driven on footpaths, parts of the public road that are reserved for pedestrians or on accessible levelled road verges. If these are not available or in poor condition, it is allowed to use other parts of the public road. If so, it is best to use cycle lanes. If these are unavailable as well, the wheelchair should be driven on the main road. Always drive on the left side of the road, against traffic. Where one drives will also determine the lightning needed when driving at night, between dusk and dawn, and during the day when visibility is limited to 200m:

- On parts of the road reserved to pedestrians, lights are not required.
- On parts of the road that are not reserved for pedestrians (such as cycle lanes), a white or yellow light should be used on the front and a red light on the back. The lights can be combined in a single device that should be placed on the left side of the wheelchair.
- When driving on the left of the road, a red light should be placed at the front and a white or yellow light at the back. The lights can be combined in a single device that should be placed on the right side of the wheelchair.

Does the upper speed limit of the wheelchair exceed walking speed? If so, the traffic rules for cyclists become applicable. The wheelchair should, if possible, be driven on cycle lanes. If none are available, it is allowed to use parking areas and road verges on the right, provided you give way to other traffic users there. Outside an urban area, the pavement or raised verge road can be used, provided you give way to vulnerable road users. If no other options are available, the wheelchair can be driven on the right side of the road. At night, between dusk and dawn, and during the day when visibility is limited to 200m, the following rules concerning lights apply: on the right side of the road or on a cycle lane, a white or yellow light should be used on the front and a red light on the back. The lights can be combined in a single device that should be placed on the left side of the wheelchair. Both fixed and flashing lights are allowed.

Are you using a non-motorised wheelchair that is propelled by pedals or handles? In theory, it should be driven on the right side of the road. It is, however, also possible to use cycle lanes, which is advisable for safety reasons. This exception only applies to wheelchairs with a maximum width of 1m. In this situation, the following rules concerning lights apply at night, between dusk and dawn, and during the day when visibility is limited to 200m:

- for three-wheeled wheelchairs with one front wheel: a white reflector on the front and two red reflectors on the back;
- for three-wheeled wheelchairs with two front wheels: two white reflectors on the front and one red reflector on the back;
- for four-wheeled wheelchairs: two white reflectors on the front, two red reflectors on the back and, additionally, yellow or orange reflectors on the pedals.

Both three-wheeled and four-wheeled wheelchairs must be equipped with a bell that is audible up to 20m.

5. Safe transport of wheelchair users

A wheelchair is considered safe to transport when it meets the requirements of the ISO 7176-19 standard. If so, the wheelchair has been crash-tested and been deemed strong enough to keep the user in its place during transport and in case of an accident. The manufacturer can state whether the wheelchair conforms to the norm by using a technical form or a test report provided by an accredited testing institute. If this is the case, it should be stated on the frame of the wheelchair and in the manual.

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