

Assistive Technology

Assistive technology is any service or tool which can help an older person or a person with a disability perform activities that might otherwise be difficult or not be possible.”

Such technology may be something as simple as a walker to make moving around easier or an amplification device to make sounds easier to hear (for talking on the telephone or watching television, for instance). It could also include a magnifying glass that helps someone who has poor vision read the newspaper or a scooter that makes it possible to travel over distances that are too far to walk. In short, anything that helps the elderly continue to participate in daily activities is considered assistive technology.

For many seniors, assistive technology makes the difference between being able to live independently and having to get long-term nursing or home-health care. For others, assistive technology is critical to the ability to perform simple activities of daily living, such as bathing and going to the bathroom.

How Can I Tell if Assistive Technology is Right for Me?

Older adults must carefully evaluate their needs before deciding to purchase assistive technology. Using assistive technology may change the mix of services that a senior requires or may affect the way that those services are provided. For this reason, the process of needs assessment and planning is important.

Usually, needs assessment has the most value when it is done by a team working with the senior in the place where the assistive technology will be used. For example, an older person who has trouble communicating or is



hard of hearing should consult with his or her doctor, an audiology specialist, a speech-language therapist, along with family and friends. Together, these people can identify the problem precisely and can help select the most effective devices available at the lowest cost. A professional member of the team, such as the audiology specialist, can also arrange for any training that the senior and his or her family may require to use the equipment needed.

When considering all the options of assistive technology, it is often useful to look at the issue in terms of high-tech and low-tech solutions. Seniors must also remember to plan ahead and think about how their needs might change over time. High-tech devices tend to be more expensive but may be able to assist with many different needs. Low-tech equipment is usually cheaper but less adaptable for multiple purposes.

How Can I Pay For Assistive Technology?

Right now, no single private insurance plan or public program will pay for all types of assistive technology under any circumstances. However, Medicare Part B will

cover up to 80% of the cost of assistive technology if the items being purchased meet the definition of “durable medical equipment.” This is defined as devices that are “primarily and customarily used to serve a medical purpose, and generally are not useful to a person in the absence of illness or injury.” To find out if Medicare will cover the cost of a particular piece of assistive technology, call 1-800-MEDICARE (1-800-633-4227, TTY/TDD: 1-877-486-2048). You can also find answers to your questions by visiting <http://www.Medicare.gov>.

Depending on where you live, the state-run Medicaid program may pay for some assistive technology. Depending on where you live, the state-run Medicaid program may pay for some assistive technology. Keep in mind, though, that even when Medicaid does cover part of the cost, the benefits usually do not provide the amount of financial aid needed to buy an expensive piece of equipment, such as a power wheelchair.

Seniors who are eligible for veterans’ benefits should definitely look into whether they can receive assistance from the Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA). Many people consider the DVA to have a model payment system for assistive technology because the agency has a structure in place to pay for the large volume of equipment that it buys. The DVA also invests in training people in how to use assistive devices. For more information about DVA benefits for assistive technology, call the VA Health Benefits Service Center toll-free at 1-877-222-VEETS or visit the department’s website at: <http://www1.va.gov/health/index.asp>

Subsidy programs provide some types of assistive technology at a reduced cost or for free. Many businesses and not-for-profit groups have set up subsidy programs that include discounts, grants, or rebates to get consumers to try a specific product. The idea is that by offering this benefit, the program sponsors can encourage seniors and people with disabilities to use an item that they otherwise might not consider. Obviously, older adults should be careful about participating in subsidy programs that

are run by businesses with commercial interests in the product or service because of the potential for fraud.

Where Can I Learn More About Assistive Technology?

Most states have at least one agency that deals specifically with assistive technology issues. The Assistive Technology Act (Tech Act) provides funds to states for the development of statewide consumer information and training programs. A listing of state tech act programs is available at: <http://www.resnaprojects.org/nattap/at/stateprograms.html>.

Some area agencies on aging (AAA) have programs or link to services that assist older people obtain low-cost assistive technology. You can call the Eldercare Locator at 1-800-677-1116 or visit the website <http://www.eldercare.gov> to locate your local AAA. In addition local civic groups, religious and veterans’ organizations, and senior centers may be able to refer you to assistive technology resources.

The following resources provide information on assistive technology products and services.

Disability.gov

<http://www.disability.gov>

This site is designed to serve as a “one-stop” electronic link to an enormous range of useful information to people with disabilities and their families.

ABLEDATA

<http://www.abledata.com>

800/227-0216 or 301/608-8998

TTY 301/608-8912

ABLEDATA is a federally funded project whose primary mission is to provide information on assistive technology and rehabilitation equipment available from domestic and international sources to consumers, organizations, professionals, and caregivers within the United States.

