

Disability Campaign.org

Prosthetic Limbs



Photo: Casey Gutteridge/swns.com

A prosthesis is an artificial device that replaces a missing body part, such as an eye, arm, or leg. If you or someone you know is a limb amputee, you may be considering a prosthetic limb. This resource sheet will cover how prostheses work, who is a candidate for prostheses, what are some factors to consider, how to obtain a prosthesis, and how to care for your prosthesis.

How does a prosthesis work?

When someone loses a limb due to injury or disease, the functionality of that limb is lost as well. The person may lose the ability to perform job skills or everyday activities, to walk or run. Prosthetic limbs help to restore some of the capabilities lost by an amputated limb and/or provide the amputee with a more “natural” look.

Modern prosthetic limbs are made of light, but strong materials. Some prosthetic limbs can be shaped and colored to match the skin tone of the recipient and make the prosthetic limb more like a natural limb. The prosthetic limb is attached to the patient’s residual limb with some kind of suspension system to keep it in place.

Different mechanisms may be used to control the movement of the prosthetic limb. Some prostheses receive signals from the residual limb; others are externally powered by motors and can be controlled by toggles and switches.

Who is a candidate for a prosthesis limb?

You and your doctors will be able to determine if you are a candidate for a prosthesis limb. The complicating factors that would prevent you from being able to use a prosthesis include injury to the residual limb, injury to another limb, or a disability.

What are some factors to consider with prostheses?

- 1. Each prosthetic limb must be custom built and custom fit,** meaning prostheses can be very costly. Fortunately, many insurance companies cover most of the cost of a basic prosthesis. Specialized prostheses (e.g. sports prostheses or designer accessories) may not be covered under insurance.
- 2. Measurements and fitting for a prosthetic limb must be done weeks after amputation surgery,** once the wound is healed and the tissue swelling has decreased.
- 3. Multiple fittings are required to get a perfect fit.** Sometimes, you will receive a temporary prosthesis to be used while you work on strengthening your body with physical therapy before you can receive a permanent prosthesis.
- 4. Physical and/or occupational therapy is required after receiving a prosthetic limb.** This may take several months of rehabilitation and training, as you will need to learn how to perform everyday activities with your new, prosthetic limb.
- 5. Prosthetic limbs may need to be resized or replaced with time.** As time goes by, an amputee's residual limb may shrink, muscles may begin to atrophy, and swelling goes down. With children, prosthetic limbs will need to be resized or replaced more frequently to keep up with their growth.



Photo: Resch family, Purdue University News

How do I obtain a prosthetic limb?

Most amputees seeking a prosthetic limb will receive a prescription for a prosthesis from a physician or surgeon. Then, a prosthetist (a person who specializes in the design and fabrication of a prosthesis limbs) will take measurements and provide a custom fit prosthesis for the amputee.

How do I care for my prosthesis?

You'll need to follow the manufacturer's instructions for the specific care of your prosthesis, but caring for your prosthesis also means caring for the rest of your body. Below are a few suggestions on how to care for yourself so that you will have a comfortable fit and prevent unnecessary wear on your prosthesis.

1. Consider bathing or showering at night, as your limb will swell and hot water or when dangling as you sit or stand to shower, therefore making it difficult to put on your prosthesis.
2. Stretch or exercise daily to strengthen your residual limb, as well as all muscles that aid in the movement of your prosthesis. Consult your doctor before starting an exercise routine.
3. Wash your residual limb with soap and water every day, and allow it to dry completely to prevent fungal growth or infections.
4. Check your residual limb for any signs of irritation, infection, sores for skin breakdown. If such symptoms occur, contact your physician immediately.

Contact your health professional and prosthetics to obtain specific recommendations for your concern/inquiries. For more general information, visit the National Commission on Orthotic and Prosthetic Education at <http://www.ncope.org/about/resources/>.

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