

# USING A MECHANICAL LIFT FOR TRANSFERS



Moving a person from bed to a chair or commode (portable toilet) is a daily task for many family caregivers of people whose illness or disability makes it difficult for them to do this on their own. This action is called a *transfer* (not to be confused with a *transition*, which is a move to a different care site). This video demonstrates how to use a mechanical lift safely and comfortably for both the person and the family caregiver.

The video covers three main areas:

- > Why you may need to use a lift
- > What you need to know about lift equipment
- > Important safety tips

This resource guide also has information about insurance coverage and additional resources.

## Is a Mechanical Lift Appropriate?

There are many types of mechanical lifts on the market; two basic varieties are those powered by battery and those powered by hand (the kind shown in the video). Your family member or friend's health care provider will recommend the type most suitable for your family member or friend and for you as the family caregiver. Be sure to explain your family member or friend's home situation, including whether the home has frequent power outages. If your family member or friend can stand and support his or her full body weight, a mechanical lift may not be necessary.

Not every person, family caregiver, or home situation is well suited for a mechanical lift. A mechanical lift might not be a good option in any of the following situations:

- > The home is too small for the lift to be safely moved around.
- > The family caregiver is frail or has health issues that make it hard for him or her to use the lift.
- > There is no additional help available if needed (many hospitals and other facilities require a "two-person transfer" for people who have very limited movement or cannot support their head).
- > The person needing to be lifted cannot understand and follow directions.

- > The person needing to be lifted has frequent episodes of agitation, confusion, or delirium and being lifted by a machine may frighten him or her.
- > The person needing to be lifted is very heavy.

Usually a mechanical lift is prescribed during hospital or rehab facility discharge. Because you will be the primary operator of the lift, you must make sure the staff understand any concerns you have about whether the lift is appropriate. (Other options for care of your family member or friend may include additional in-home assistance from aides or other family members, or transition to a skilled nursing facility.)

## Operating a Mechanical Lift

In the video, a physical therapist shows Frank, who has had a stroke, and his wife, Sarah, how to use the mechanical lift prescribed by Frank's doctor. Be sure to keep the manufacturer's information that comes with the lift in case you have questions when you are on your own.

Although the details vary, all mechanical lifts have the same basic parts. There is a *U-shaped base* with wheels that can be locked. A *spreader handle* makes it possible to adjust the base, making it wider for stability or narrower to fit around furniture. Controls are located on the upright stand (called a *mast*) to raise and lower the lift.

A *sling with straps* that attaches to the lift supports the person's weight during the transfer. There are two main types of slings:

1. A C- or U-shaped sling (the type shown in the video) has an opening at the bottom so that the person can be transferred to use the toilet or commode while remaining in the sling. This style of sling can also be easily removed after the person is transferred to a

chair and can be replaced when it's time to transfer the person back to bed.

2. A full-body sling is a rectangular-style sling that wraps around the person's body from the top of his or her head to the top of the thighs, without an opening underneath. This style provides more support but cannot be easily removed once the person is transferred to a chair or commode.

The sling straps have loops that attach to the sling bar. Make sure you use the same loop options on both sides when you connect the sling to the lift. The video shows how to position the sling under the person when he or she is in bed, rolling the person from side to side, and how to attach the sling to the lift. If you are using a U- or C-shaped sling, you can remove it once your family member or friend is safely in the chair. Lift each leg to slide the sling leg pieces out from under them. Then have your family member or friend lean forward so you can remove the sling from behind him or her. When it's time to replace the sling for the transfer back to bed, ask your family member or friend to bend forward so you can center the sling behind his or her back. Then pull the sling leg pieces down to lie on the outside of the thighs. Slide the leg pieces under with the ends pulled up between the thighs. Make sure everything is secure and not twisted before you attach the sling to the lift and raise your family member or friend up to put him or her back in bed.

Check the sling for wear and tear every time it is used; replace it if it is damaged. Wash or sanitize the sling regularly. If it is soiled, follow the manufacturer's instructions for best cleaning practices. Don't put the sling in the dryer and don't bleach or iron it. Wipe it regularly with a damp cloth. Never let children play with the sling (or the lift itself). If you have a motorized lift, keep the battery charged.

If you have a physical therapist, nurse, or representative of the supplier helping you learn how to use the lift, take notes and ask questions. Practice while that person is there, until you are confident you can safely use the lift to transfer your family member or friend. Keep the manufacturer's manual easily available. Check the

manufacturer's website for videos and instructions on how to operate the model of your mechanical lift.

Mechanical lifts can make a difficult task easier and safer, both for the person who needs assistance in transferring and for you as the family caregiver. If you decide a mechanical lift fits your family member or friend's needs and your own capabilities, the appropriate model and thorough instruction should give you confidence to do the job safely and efficiently.

## Paying for a Mechanical Lift

Medicare, Medicaid, and most private insurance plans will cover a mechanical lift prescribed by a health care professional. Under Medicare, a mechanical lift is considered Durable Medical Equipment (or DME) and is covered by Part B. The lift can be bought or rented; the company supplying the lift must be a "participating" supplier; that is, it accepts Medicare payment. If the supplier does not participate in Medicare, it can charge any fee it chooses. For a participating supplier, your family member's contribution will be 20 percent after a deductible has been reached. For other insurance coverage, make sure you check with the insurance carrier about costs.

## Additional Resources

The US Food and Drug Administration (which also regulates medical devices) provides a comprehensive safety guide about patient lifts. Although intended for aides and nursing assistants, the information is applicable to family caregivers as well. Go to <https://www.fda.gov/media/88149/download>.

Manufacturers' websites have information about their products, how to select the right model, and how to operate them, as well as prices. You can check different websites before you choose a model or after you have the product at home to review safety and operating procedures.

There are many other videos and resource guides in this Operating Specialized Medical Equipment series. Go to [www.aarp.org/nolongeralone](http://www.aarp.org/nolongeralone) for a complete listing.

*AARP Public Policy Institute  
Prepared by Carol Levine, United Hospital Fund*