

The Bruno Turny passenger seat in this van turns completely outside of the vehicle before lowering—eliminating the need to climb up.



BIG TICKET ITEMS:

Buying an **Adapted** Vehicle

B Y R A C H E L A D E L S O N

On her bad days, Vicky Watkins was lifting her uncooperative left leg with her hand in order to brake her car.

On his good days, Gerald Pilgrim was arriving at work aching with fatigue, even though his late-model station wagon was fully equipped with power steering and power brakes.

PHOTOS: FORD MOBILITY MOTORING

For a while, both Gerald and Vicky avoided discussing these problems, fearing they would be told to stop driving. But both of them are reasonable people. Moreover, Vicky knew about hand-operated controls; she just hated the idea. (See “I never wanted to buy a van”, on page 21.) Gerald, on the other hand, had never heard of low-effort steering wheels. Thanks to adaptations, both of them are now safely behind the wheel and on the road.

Start with the basics

This is a big deal. Getting an adapted vehicle is much more involved than an ordinary search for new wheels. It involves all that goes into a car purchase, plus. While doctors may offer general ideas they don't necessarily know the best and latest adaptive equipment. Most people will need a driving specialist—a physical or occupational therapist with adapted-vehicle experience. The specialist can help determine specific needs and ensure that good driver training is in the mix.

Physical therapist Susan Kushner, an associate professor at Slippery Rock University's Graduate School of Physical Therapy, notes that insurers often reimburse people for seeing a physical therapist who can recommend adaptive equipment. And a professional's prescription can be the key to tax deductions and other financial help, discussed on pages 19–20.

A specialist and a driving assessment

A neurologist who has many patients with MS may refer you to a qualified therapist.

Your National MS Society chapter may have driving specialists on its referral list. Or you can start by calling the Association of Driver Rehabilitation Specialists—ADED—at 800-290-2344.

ADED recommends an evaluation for adapted driving. If you undergo driving rehabilitation, you will get a prescription for the vehicle modifications that best suit your needs. For a preview of the association's driving assessment, visit www.infinitec.org/live/driving/driveassess.htm on the Web.



A steering wheel modified with hand controls.

You are still left with a host of choices: should you adapt the vehicle you have or purchase a new or a used one? Which equipment provider will meet your needs? How can all this be financed? And how can you choose among all the available adaptive products?

Educate yourself

From product selection to financing, this is “a process you have to work through,” according to Jerry Stalls, president of Stalls Medical Inc. of Raleigh, North Carolina, who has been an adaptive equipment

provider for 30 years.

One prime information source is ABLEDATA, supported by the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (www.abledata.com or 800-227-0216). ABLEDATA provides current product listings, manufacturer information, consumer guides, and fact sheets.

Project Link, a nationwide information service (www.phhp.ufl.edu/ot/projectlink or 877-770-7303), mails manufacturers'



Space behind the driver's seat for a fold-up wheelchair.

catalogs and brochures to registered users. **Disability Resources Monthly** supports a comprehensive Web site (www.disabilityresources.org) with a regional resource directory and hundreds of useful links, including some funding sources.

Two other prime sources are:

Infinitec at www.infinitec.org, which explores "infinite potential through assistive technology" (click the "Live" tab for information on adaptive driving); and the National Rehabilitation Information Center at www.naric.com, a nationwide clearinghouse of research and databases.

Options, options, options

Jerry Stalls has learned from his years in the rehab field that it's best not to take the first option presented when you shop. He says that when providers "work through the different questions that help the consumer understand the options, they pick something that works well for them and their lifestyle."

Most people with mobility issues chose specially adapted and outfitted vans. **Disabled Dealer Magazine** is published in regional editions, so the vehicle you want won't be 2,000 miles away. Both magazine and Web site (www.disableddealer.com) list used accessible vehicles and other equipment, with pricing, photos, specifications, and contact information. The Web site also lists mobility equipment dealers nationwide and, among other things, posts links to accessible van rental agencies for when you travel. Your local medical equipment provider may work with vehicles or may refer you to a car dealer. Not all vans can be modified, so check with an accessibility expert before you agree to buy.

The National Highway Transportation Safety Administration (NHTSA) posts a brochure at www.nhtsa.dot.gov/cars/rules/adaptive/brochure with information on evaluating your needs, choosing the right vehicle, selecting a qualified dealer, and more. The National MS Society also posts tips at www.nationalmssociety.org/IMSSp01-AdaptiveDevices.asp.

If you are a veteran, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) offers reimbursement and driver training through its hospital network. Contact your local VA

office or call the VA's Prosthetic and Sensory Aids Service in Washington, DC, at 202-273-8515.

Get help paying for it

Insurance won't pay for vehicles or adaptations. What should you do? Start with your state's vocational rehabilitation agency if driving is linked to your ability to keep or find employment. Next, investigate grants from local social-service

organizations, foundations, or agencies such as Easter Seals or the Lions Club. The ABLEDATA Information Center includes a Funding Resource Center. Your Society chapter may have information on other funding in your area.

Loans custom-fit for people with disabilities are available. For example, the Digital Federal Credit Union (www.dcu.org) offers members of the American Association for People with Dis-

What's out there? What do you need?

Many drivers with MS use modified vehicles and adaptive equipment. Costs vary greatly. A spinner knob that helps when two-handed steering is difficult costs about \$75. A new vehicle completely modified with adaptive equipment—hand controls for accelerator and brake, mechanical lifts for wheelchair or scooter, wheelchair tie-downs, steering devices and extensions, low-effort brakes, and a drop floor—can cost from \$20,000 to \$80,000, according to the U.S. Department of Transportation's National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. An occupational therapist is often the best guide to individual solutions.

Susan Kushner offers these basic tips:

- When selecting a car, consider four-door models because they have shorter and lighter doors that are easier to push open than two-door models. Consider the seats—are they too low or too high? How easy are they to adjust? Vinyl or leather seats are easier to slide

on than upholstered seats. Or wear a pair of "swishy" fabric slacks (like nylon running pants) to make sliding in and out easier.

- Opt for a tilt steering wheel. It makes getting in and out less difficult. You can use the wheel as a grab bar when it's tilted to a lower position. It gives you leverage pulling and pivoting yourself out of the seat.

- If you use a wheelchair, keep a transfer board handy and secure it to the chair so you can shimmy in and out of the driver's seat. If people help you transfer, don't let them risk hurting their backs in pivoting you in and out—use the transfer board.

- If heat bothers you, make sure the car has an adequate air conditioner.

- In winter, keep a small container (like a margarine tub) of rock salt or ice-melt in the car. Open the window and scatter it on icy walks or driveways before you get out of the car.

abilities special Mobility Vehicle and Access loans. But check your local banks and finance agencies as well. Finally, most major automobile manufacturers offer some financial assistance—usually grants up to \$1,000—for installing adaptive equipment, but only on new vehicles. (See resources, below.)

Ask a tax consultant about sales-tax exemptions on equipment purchases and whether any of your costs qualify for tax deduction as medical expenses. Should an adaptation qualify as a medical necessity, you can deduct your out-of-pocket cost from your federal taxes. To support the deduction (in the event of an audit), get a

letter from your prescribing professional. You can get literature outlining the tax code for medical equipment by calling the IRS at 800-829-1040 or by visiting www.irs.gov. (Publications 3966, 907, and 502 may be of greatest relevance.)

Check used vehicles and adaptations carefully

You'd love a new vehicle, but this is real life—where even used vehicles can give a person sticker shock. Used equipment may be your best option, too. But with any used item, it's buyer beware.

Take a used vehicle you're considering to your own mechanic, not the dealer's—before you invest in modifying (or further modifying). Make sure it's in good enough shape to be worth it. Then have your adapted-driving specialist check it as well. When buying a previously adapted vehicle, get quotes in advance on any further modifications you may require. You can find used equipment through many medical equipment providers, some auto dealers, classified ads in newspapers and online. Ask around!

Learn how to drive it

To hire a professional driving instructor with experience teaching people with disabilities, check with your state vocational rehabilitation agency, the automaker mobility programs listed in the Resources box at left, your physical or occupational therapist, or your local adapted-vehicle modifier. ■

Rachel Adelson is a freelance journalist based in Raleigh, North Carolina.

Adapted vehicle resources

Disabled Dealer Magazine
www.disableddealer.com

Handicaps Inc., 800-782-4335 or
www.handicapsinc.com

National Mobility Equipment Dealers Association, 800-833-0427 or www.nmeda.org

Ford Mobility Motoring Program, 800-952-2248 or www.ford.com/mobilitymotoring

General Motors Mobility Program, 800-323-9935 or www.gmmobility.com

Saturn Mobility Program, 800-553-6000, Prompt 3, or www.saturn.com/saturn/contactus/faq/mobility/index.jsp

Toyota Mobility Program, 800 874-8822 or www.toyota.com/html/mobility