

Assistive Technology (AT)

What Is Assistive Technology?

Assistive technology (AT) is any kind of device or program that can be useful for a person with any kind of disability. AT ranges from a simple (low tech) device like a cane to a complex (high tech) tool like an electronic communications board.

Why Do People Use Assistive Technology?

For some people with disabilities, daily tasks such as getting dressed, talking with friends, going to school or work, or participating in recreational activities can be challenging. AT devices are tools that can help overcome those challenges. They can help people with disabilities to get things done and improve their quality of life.

What Are Examples of AT?

High Tech: An electronic communication system for a person who cannot speak; head trackers that allow a person with no hand movement to enter data into a computer

Low Tech: A magnifying glass for a person with low vision; a communication board made of cardboard for a person who cannot speak

Big: An automated van lift for a wheelchair user

Small: A grip attached to a pen or fork for a person who has trouble with his fingers



Photo courtesy Assistive Technology for Kansans

Hardware: A keyboard-pointing device for a person who has trouble using her hands

Software: A screen reading program, such as JAWS, for a person who is blind

Who Uses AT?

People of all ages need and use AT. For example:

- A student with autism who is overwhelmed by too much going on in the room might manipulate a soft “stress” ball to stay focused in class.
- A father who is deaf might use a baby cry device with flashing lights to know when his baby is crying.

- A citizen who is blind might use touch (like Braille) or audio recordings at the election polls to cast her ballot privately and independently.
- A grandmother who has difficulty walking might use a walker to get to the ball field, and may sit on it while watching her grandson play baseball.

How Do I Know If AT Would Help Me?

- If you have a major limitation, such as the inability to hear, a doctor or therapist may recommend a device, such as a hearing aid.
- If your limitation has occurred suddenly or worsened over time, you might be referred for rehabilitation services to help you learn how to continue activities of daily living, such as eating, dressing or bathing. A rehabilitation therapist might recommend AT that would help you. For example, if you have difficulty using eating utensils due to rheumatoid arthritis, a therapist might recommend utensils with special handles that are easier to hold.
- You may learn about AT that will help you from other people with the same condition or limitation. Websites of organizations that focus on specific disabilities might provide information on useful AT. Check out the American Stroke Foundation, the National Spinal Cord Injury Association, or another website that interests you.
- AbleData, an assistive technology database, provides unbiased, comprehensive information on products, solutions and resources to “improve productivity and ease life’s tasks.” AbleData is funded by the U.S. government and has an online search function. The web address is <http://www.abledata.com/> and the phone number is 1-800-227-0216.
- Every state has an assistive technology program that assists people with disabilities in learning more about AT. To find the program in your state, see the RESNA Catalyst Project listed in Resources.



www.rightsstuff.biz

Rehabilitation therapists can recommend tools to fit your needs, such as the adapted eating utensils shown above.

Where Can I Get AT?

That depends on what type of AT you need. Some possible sources are:

- Durable medical equipment (DME) vendors
- Medical supply vendors
- Orthotist or prosthetist shops
- Discount or department stores
- Pharmacies
- Centers for Independent Living and other community agencies often loan devices or give away used items
- Your state’s AT program may either provide equipment or assist you in locating AT

How Do I Pay for AT?

Again, that depends on what type of AT you need. Here are possibilities:

- **Health care insurance or coverage:** For items used to perform activities of daily living (such as wheelchairs) or for medical devices (such as insulin pumps), health insurers or Medicaid may pay for assistive technology. Check with your health care coverage to see if the AT recommended for you is covered.
- **School districts:** For items essential to a child's education, a school district may provide items under IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) for students in grades K-12. Examples include an electronic page turner or an adaptive switch that allows a child with limited hand movement to operate a toy.
- **Vocational rehabilitation (VR):** Every state has a Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agency, partially funded by federal dollars, with the goal of helping persons with disabilities achieve their employment goals. These agencies may fund assistive and rehabilitation technology services related to employment.
- **Home and Community-Based Services (HCBS):** These services, also called long-term services and supports (LTSS), help people get home care in community settings rather than in an institution. An agency providing HCBS might install grab bars to allow a person to transfer in and out of the shower independently, or a ramp to allow a person to enter and exit the home safely. AT might be a more cost-effective option to providing in-home personal care for some tasks.
- **Community agencies:** Some local agencies accept donations of used equipment and then loan or give them to others who need them. Centers for Independent Living (CILs) often have such programs, or they will likely know where you can find them in your community.
- **State Assistive Technology programs:** Every state has a program to address AT needs for people with disabilities. Depending on the state, possible services include opportunities to borrow or try out a device before deciding to purchase one; getting a grant or low-cost loan to purchase a device; or getting a refurbished device.
- **Charitable Organizations:** Some local clubs, such as Lions or Kiwanis, may dedicate funds to providing equipment for individuals in need.

Many services and organizations help people with disabilities get the AT they need.



Resources

AbleData, Tools & Technologies to Enhance Life - <http://www.abledata.com>

RESNA Catalyst Project List of State Assistive Technology Programs - <http://www.resnaprojects.org/allcontacts/statewidecontacts.html>

ILRU Directory of Centers for Independent Living (CILs) in the U.S. and territories - <http://www.ilru.org/projects/cil-net/cil-center-and-association-directory>

ICAN's "Get the facts about assistive technology" - <http://www.ar-ican.org/publications.html>

Every state has an assistive technology program that helps people with disabilities learn more about AT.

To find the program in your state, see the RESNA Catalyst Project listed in Resources.

This fact sheet is for informational purposes and is not meant to take the place of health care services you may need. Please see your health care provider about any health concerns.

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