

CONSUMER GUIDE

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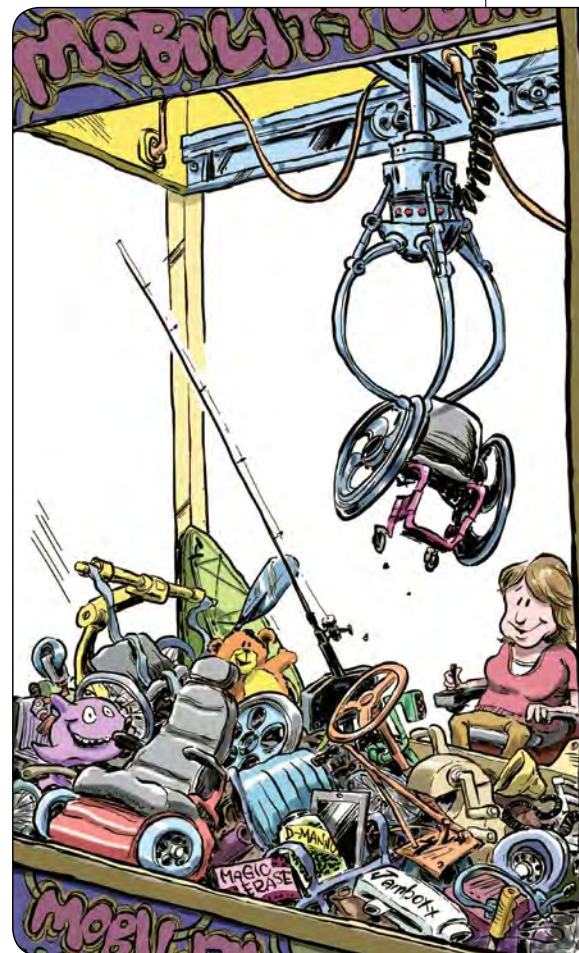
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Cover Illustration by Doug Davis

This year our Consumer Guide also features statistics from "15 Interesting Questions for Wheelchair Users," a survey in our November e-newsletter answered by 344 readers at press time. These stats appear throughout the issue, at the top of selected pages. Here is one interesting question to get started:

Which statement is more true for you?

I will use devices for any functional gain, no matter how small: 61%
I might skip a little gain in function if I think the device makes me look "more disabled": 39%



LIFE INSIDE A VACUUM (CLEANER)

BY MARK MATHEW BRAUNSTEIN

it was way too heavy for me to lift and carry with one hand, so I could not maneuver it in and out of tight spots. I could not return it in the shredded box. Instead I gave away the heavyweight champ and bought a lightweight.

You know the brand, named after its inventor. It was so light that I could lift it with one finger, just like in the ads. But it cleaned floors hardly any better than a manual carpet sweeper. Carpet sweepers cost far less, require no costly replacement bags, make little

noise, consume no electricity, and drag around no power cord that inevitably coils around my wheelchair's casters and wheels. So I reverted to using my old carpet sweeper and stashed my upright vac into the closet, where it now is gathering dust.

Next I bought a backpack vac, whose canisters you wear on your back. They all are industrial models with industrial-strength prices, but I refused to let cost deter from my pursuit of the wheelchair-accessible vacuum cleaner. Again shopping online, I chose a model that looks like a jetpack capable of propelling its wearer into the air like Superman.

With the backpack vac on my back, I found my backrest obstructed my range of motion. Further limiting mobility was that dang power cord, again. Actually this cord was worse. Thick and heavy, its industrial-strength cord was unwieldy and weighed as much as the backpack vac, which was considerable. And it was uncomfortable, designed to be worn while standing. I learned that the human back has a different curvature while seated. Soon enough, I resorted

back to my old manual carpet sweeper and added the backpack vac to my arsenal in the closet, where it, too, now is gathering dust.

One summer day, I sat in a friend's backyard where she put me to work while she prepared our lunch. She handed me her lawnmower. It was lightweight, compact, and electric. A power cord dangling from a mower surely would get mauled, so this was cordless. Cordless? Eureka!

Next day I shopped online for battery-powered cordless vacuum cleaners and found only a handful. Before I name names, let me assure you that I have received no compensation from the manufacturer for my endorsement. In fact, you will read this before they do. That said, I bought a Dyson handheld vac, model DC35. It really is handheld, meaning I can hold it with only one hand, while my other hand navigates and propels my wheelchair. This vac really rocks!

Among the Dyson's full array of attachments is a motorized floor tool that cleans carpets as efficiently as did my heavyweight upright. The cordless Dyson DC35 runs on a rechargeable lithium-ion battery. When set to high power mode and used with the motorized floor tool, its charge is advertised to last a scant six minutes. A convenient untruth! Mine lasts 20 minutes. Nearly two years old, the battery still shows little sign of aging or of a reduced charge.

Meanwhile I am showing signs of aging, indicated by my own reduced charges. I must be getting old, because I thoroughly enjoy my 20-minute stints on vac patrol. This vac could not have arrived at a better time in my life. I truly have found happiness living inside a vacuum.

Mark is a frequent contributor to NEW MOBILITY. You can read more of his work at MarkBraunstein.org.

The author released himself from cords and backpack vacs when he discovered the Dyson handheld.

WE hope for recovery, but settle for rehab. The rehab hospital from which I graduated, Class of '90, prepared me for life as a newly minted cripple by, for instance, teaching me how to drive my car with hand controls. Once home, however, I grappled with another monstrous machine for which I had not trained in rehab. The behemoth was my vacuum cleaner. Mine was a model whose canister is dragged along the floor like a ball and chain. I soon learned that wheelchairs and canister vacuum cleaners are not a good match.

I tried vacuuming with that sinister canister on my lap, one hand guiding the dangling power cord away from my wheels, my other hand wielding the hose and wand, but no hand free to propel the wheelchair. I did not get very far.

I shopped online and ordered an upright vacuum cleaner. Three days later a huge cardboard carton arrived. The new vac was so heavy that to remove it I had to peel the box away like a banana. Upright and righteous, it very effectively cleaned my floors. But