

Technology charges forward

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Technology to help disabled people move and walk is changing rapidly.

"It's almost like computers," says Brad Shebib, physical therapist for Wright & Fillippis, a Rochester Hills medical device company. "By next week, the technology seems obsolete."

Here's a brief summary of some of the new devices being used for rehabilitation of people with spinal cord injuries.

- **Gait-training devices.** Mobile frames with harness devices help people regain gait and balance in a progression of physical activities. One of the most advanced systems is made by Second Step for \$5,150. Some auto and private insurance plans cover it. 941-545-7580; cq-anstett<http://www.secondstepinc.com/>. In Michigan and Ohio, Messer Orthopedics handles distribution. <http://www.messerorthopedics.com/> or call 616-863-3330.
- **Leg braces.** Unlike the stiff models from decades ago, the newest brands are lightweight and flexible. One type, KAFO braces (knee, ankle, foot orthosis) are carbon-fiber with a locking knee mechanism that helps move the leg when a patients is walking. Orthotist Bill Messer designs each pair individually. They also can be shortened once mobility is established. They are used in conjunction with walkers. \$8,000 to \$14,000 for a pair. Insurance coverage varies. Contact information for Messer Orthopedics listed above.
- **Exercise bicycles and treadmills.** There are many types, including models attached to electrical stimulation units. Another approach to locomotion devices is GigerMD, a machine used for people with spinal cord and brain injuries, Parkinson's disease and other conditions. It helps move all four limbs while a patient is lying down, taking the load off the back. \$11,000. For more information: <http://www.gigermd.com.cq-anstett/>
- **Crutches.** Loftstrand crutches are a type of crutch with forearm attachments that help with walking and balance activities. \$97. Widely available, including through Wright & Filippis and other medical equipment companies.
- **Ibot wheelchairs.** A chair that climbs stairs, moves on a variety of terrains, and elevates or lowers for eye-level contact or to roll under desks. Cost varies with individual requirements, but the chair is about \$26,100 and is covered fully or partly by some insurance plans. <http://www.ibotnow.com/> . In metro Detroit, the distributor is the Recovery Project, <http://www.recoveryproject.net/>, or call 734-591-1837.
- **Laser:** A low-powered diode laser used by Laura Anders, a Bethesda, Md., laser pioneer. Her lab experiments regenerating nerve connections in injured animals are described on her Web site: <http://usuhs.mil/nes/Anders.htm.cq-anstett> Cost: \$9,000. Details at <http://www.thorlaser.com.cq-anstett/>

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