MANY PEOPLE WITH chronic diseases face challenges with muscle coordination and strength. For them, assistive devices, such as canes, walkers and wheelchairs, are the keys to mobility and independence. When choosing one or more of these products, patients should consider their needs, function, ability and size.

Canes
Canes provide a wider base of support and a more stable gait. The most commonly used is a single-point cane that, when placed on the floor, looks like an upside down J. When possible, a cane should be used on the side of the body opposite the affected leg. For instance, if the left foot is injured, the cane should be held in the right hand. Doing so keeps the body in line with its natural gait motion.

The length of a cane is directly related to the height of the person using it. A cane too long can cause shoulder problems, and one too short can cause poor posture. Improper fit also can cause a loss of balance. When checking the height of a cane, normal walking shoes should be worn. The individual being fitted should stand with normal posture and the arms down and relaxed. To ensure proper height, a second person can turn the cane upside down and place the handle on the floor next to the individual being fitted. The tip of the cane should reach, but not exceed, the crease in the wrist.

Walkers
Patients needing more stability than a cane should consider a walker. With greater stability, a patient is more apt to ambulate longer, thus improving endurance and keeping large muscles as strong as possible. As when selecting a cane, normal walking shoes should be worn when being fitted for a walker. While keeping your hands at your sides, make sure the handles of the walker reach the crease in the wrist.

When choosing a walker, close attention should be paid to the wheels. Caster wheels, ones that turn freely when changing directions, are easier to maneuver; however, they are not quite as stable as fixed wheels, which may be needed for weight bearing. Patients needing a little more stability but still wanting the flexibility of caster wheels may want to consider purchasing a walker with hand brakes. Another option is to choose a walker with a seat, which allows the user to take breaks. A walker with a seat is not intended, however, to substitute for a wheelchair.

Wheelchairs
Even for those able to ambulate, a wheelchair for longer distances or quicker transportation may be necessary. For short, temporary transportation, a basic collapsible wheelchair may be all that is required. Collapsible wheelchairs are not meant to be a main mode of mobility, however, as the seat does not provide adequate support for long-term use. If a wheelchair is to be the main source of mobility, patients should seek a professional evaluation by a rehabilitation specialist. The patient’s size, physical needs, environment and mode of transportation all need to be carefully assessed. An informative site to visit before meeting with a specialist is www.healthcare.uiowa.edu/cdd/patients/wcprint.asp.

Quality of Life
Choosing the right equipment with the proper amount of support is key to optimizing a patient’s quality of life. Utilizing a physical therapist for assistance is advisable. To find one, go to www.apta.org and click on the menu option “Find a PT.”