

HEALTHCARE AND THE AMERICANS WITH DISABILITIES ACT



The United States will recognize Disability Awareness Day on July 26, 2021, the 31st anniversary of passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). For people with disabilities, including those with neuromuscular disease (NMD), the law resulted in more accessible communities through a wide range of adaptations, such as ramps on building entrances, tactile warning surfaces, and wheelchair lifts on public transportation.

Healthcare is an important component of the ADA. According to the [National Council on Disability \(NCD\)](#), more than 20 million adults in the United States have disabilities that limit their functional mobility, hindering their ability to access medical diagnostic equipment (MDE).

The ADA specifies that people with disabilities should have “full and equal access to their healthcare services and facilities.” Even so, people with mobility impairments often encounter significant physical accessibility barriers when trying to obtain preventative, primary, and specialized medical care.

“Despite significant advancements in accessibility of the built environment, medical offices and healthcare facilities continue to lag behind in compliance,” says Allison Nichol, JD, an adjunct professor at Georgetown Law in Washington, DC, and Director of Legal Advocacy for the Epilepsy Foundation.

Increasing access to healthcare

How can healthcare providers and institutions support greater inclusivity of NMD patients? Here are a few steps to take:

- 1. Improve access and equity in care.** This starts with making sure your building has basic accessibility features that allow safe entry, such as handicap parking spaces, curb ramps or loading zones, and wide doorways that allow easy entry for mobility aids, such as wheelchairs. Acquire accessible MDE, examination tables and chairs, weight scales, and imaging equipment.
- 2. Educate staff about medical diagnostic equipment.** Make sure your team knows where accessible MDE is located within the building, and train them on how to use it properly. That can help prevent injury for both employees and patients, improving satisfaction and outcomes.
- 3. Improve disability cultural competence.** According to the NCD, "The absence of professional training on disability competency issues for healthcare practitioners is one of the most significant barriers that prevent people with disabilities from receiving appropriate and effective healthcare." All staff and administrators should undergo training to enhance awareness and understanding of disability issues. This ultimately can improve compassion and improve overall quality of care.
- 4. Expand telemedicine options.** As the COVID-19 pandemic restricted face-to-face healthcare for everyone last year, providers had the opportunity to see the benefits of telemedicine. This mode of healthcare delivery was not only effective in preventing the spread of infection; it also was convenient and accessible for NMD patients. Find ways to continue offering telemedicine options to patients with NMD when appropriate, and ensure that staff is properly trained to use the platforms.

Enhanced accessibility can be cost-effective

Healthcare providers often argue that making changes to a building or treatment space to improve accessibility is costly, and purchasing accessible MDE is not a good investment because it would be used less frequently than standard equipment. However, "the provision of accessible MDE creates a competitive advantage for healthcare providers and enables them to attract a greater number of patients with disabilities," the NCD reports.

Accessibility also improves quality measures, such as safety and satisfaction — for both employees and patients. And, if people with disabilities are more willing to seek preventative care and screenings because they know they will not face accessibility barriers, healthcare costs will ultimately be reduced.

Healthcare providers who work with NMD patients often are aware of the accessibility barriers their patients face. In addition to increasing their own compliance with the ADA where needed, they can be instrumental in educating other healthcare providers about the needs of the NMD community and how to support greater inclusivity of NMD patients with disabilities.

Resources used:

[National Council on Disability \(NCD\) report](#) titled *Enforceable Accessible Medical Equipment Standards—A Necessary Means to Address the Health Care Needs of People with Mobility Disabilities*.

[MDA Advocacy Institute: Celebrating the 30th Anniversary of the Americans Disabilities Act](#)

[Q&A with Dr. Shafeeq Ladha: Telemedicine for Management of Patients with ALS](#)

[The Current State of Health Care for People with Disabilities](#)

[Improving Access to Telehealth](#)

[Telemedicine in ALS and other Neuromuscular Diseases](#)

[The Use of Telehealth to Enhance Care in ALS and other Neuromuscular Disorders](#)

[MDA Telemedicine Resources](#)