

Those Rolling Things

By Nancy M. Lowe, MPT, CHT, CAE

We see them rolling down corridors, up ramps, into elevators. Wheeled backpacks, laptop cases, luggage, and other wheeled things have rolled right into our everyday lives. A wheeled case or bag can be a godsend for transporting bulky or heavy items. But to use one effectively you should select thoughtfully and watch out for dangers.



When selecting a case or carrier, one of the first things you'll think about is how the case will hold and organize the items you need to transport. Many cases have designated places for pens, business cards, calculator, file folders, and laptop. But do your digital camera, PDA, cell phone, and/or other digital devices, as well as keys, thumb-drives, and/or disks also need designated safe and accessible places in which to ride? You must select for yourself, considering your specific needs.

Other features that may be as important as the carrying compartments include: size, type and spacing of the wheels; grip and length of the handle; ease of extending and retracting the handle; and weight of the case.

When evaluating a rolling case, turn it over and inspect the bottom. One of my favorite cases has two 2-1/4 inch inline skate wheels located on the outer edges of the back of the case. My case rolls easily, thanks to the good wheels. Because of the wide wheel base it doesn't flip when I hit an uneven spot on the pavement or the edge of a ramp. A flipping case can be very disconcerting as well as dangerous to you and anyone close to you. My case has two stabilizing legs set very close to the front so that the bag will stand upright when I walk away from it. Even if I make it top-heavy by leaving the handle extended it doesn't fall forward like some bags can do.

After the undercarriage passes your inspection, turn your attention to the pull handle. It should be comfortable in your hand. If rough or very small in diameter it may become uncomfortable for moderate to long walks with weight in the bag. A good telescoping handle should be very easy to extend and retract. A release button on the handle will enable you to retract it using one hand. Now make sure the handle is long enough that you can walk completely upright using your normal stride while you pull the bag. You should not have to bend over to pull it, or modify your stride to avoid the case banging your heels as you walk.

Another important handle is the carry handle attached to the top of the bag. You will use this one to lift the bag into the car or, hopefully rarely, to carry it up a flight of stairs. Just see that this handle is sturdy and comfortable in the hand. A rounded or padded underside can be a help. If this is an oblong bag like a suitcase,

it can be helpful to have a carry handle on the end as well as the top. Many wheeled cases also come with shoulder straps, which I fervently hope you will never have to use. If you do carry a heavy bag with a shoulder strap, switch shoulders often, use the handle to help distribute the load to your arms, and put the bag down when you're not walking.

Rolling backpacks are another story. These hybrids seem to be intended for rolling and for carrying on the back. But the weight of the backpack's wheel and handle mechanisms may make it unwieldy for carrying on the back. If you do plan to carry this bag I suggest keeping the load light, the distances small, and using both straps in order to distribute the load evenly. You might consider instead using two separate bags – one for rolling and another for carrying on the back – or a folding luggage carrier that you can use when you want to roll your bag and put away when you want to carry it.

For another hybrid, the rolling duffel bag, I have similar recommendations: avoid carrying it for long distances, and make sure you can roll it without stooping over.

Now that you've selected a rolling case or bag that will work for you, it's time to plan to use it carefully. Protecting your back and avoiding tripping are the prime precautions. If your bag is large and heavy, try to get a helper to assist you in lifting it, especially into and out-of the trunk of your car. To avoid tripping yourself and others, stay aware of your surroundings and plan ahead. Go around turns slowly and watch for hazards that might bring the bag to a sudden unplanned stop. If others are nearby, walk with the bag close to you or stand still with it if necessary. They may be able to see you but not the bag. Call their attention to its location if you need to.

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