



TRADING UP a close up look at prosthetic foot technology



Often, when an amputee walks into a prosthetic office to be fitted for an artificial leg, they don't get offered a choice of what kind of foot is used. Why? One reason is that if you are funded on the public ALS (Artificial Limb Scheme) system for your state, the funding is restrictive and therefore there aren't many options available (other than very basic ones) to you on the limb scheme. Rather than disappoint you with options that would not be covered, clinicians don't always discuss better componentry.

Another reason, whether you are a public or privately funded patient, is that we simply don't ask the questions. It surprises me that I don't see that many amputees involved in their own healthcare. Look at it this way – would you ever shop for a car like that? Would you meet a car salesman, have a 10 minute chat and then ask him to pick out a car for you and then simply drive off? Of course not. You

would want to see some options and make an informed decision. You spend more time and effort picking out a car than a leg and I bet most of you spend a lot more time walking on your leg than driving in a car!

With that in mind, we should take it upon ourselves to learn more about the options that are available to us. Technology changes at a rapid pace (like most things these days) and it can be tough to keep up. As an exercise, I will take a look at two feet for comparison. They are the Flex-Foot® Assure and the Flex-Foot® Variflex. (Please forgive me for using Ossur products here, but it wouldn't be appropriate for me to discuss another manufacturer's products and risk getting the details wrong.)

Both the Flex-Foot® Assure and the Flex-Foot® Variflex are carbon fibre feet. This material is used because it is lightweight, flexible and provides great energy return. They both are

designed with a "J" shape that helps the foot to open and close when it is loaded and unloaded which makes the foot act like a spring to absorb shock and propel you while you walk.



Flex Foot® Assure

The Flex-Foot® Assure is the more basic design of the two. It is mostly designed for stability and comfort and indicated for amputees that perform activities that are relatively low impact. While you can be quite active on the Assure, it is really designed

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for tasks such as moderate walking and basic ambulation.



Flex Foot® Variflex

The Flex-Foot® Variflex picks up where the Assure leaves off and is a higher quality product. While the shape is similar, the grade of carbon fibre is much better and is therefore more dynamic and durable. This means that the Variflex is better suited for all walking speeds and capable of higher energy return and impact levels. It is appropriate for all levels of activity from basic walking to sports and situations that require a range of loading such as carrying weight, running and jumping. The Flex-Foot® Variflex is also much more adjustable for customizing how it walks to your preference and it has a “split toe” design which helps the foot adjust to uneven terrain.

Of course these advantages come at a cost, and that is why the Flex-Foot® Assure is covered by the ALS in most states in Australia, but the Flex-Foot® Variflex is not. For this reason, you are much less likely

to hear about the better grade equivalent unless you ask about it.

So, what does this mean to you? Essentially, there are a few small features that can mean a big impact on your quality of life. Features like the ones described here may or may not matter to what you need from a prosthesis. If they don't, then the basic stuff will suit just fine. If some of the other features will benefit you though, you might want to consider giving it a look. (This does touch on the sensitive topic of finances and obviously upgrading components might require additional funds, but I would rather let that be my choice rather than one that is made by a prosthetist or funding group for me.) Most of the manufacturers offer a 60-day trial on feet. So, inquire at your local prosthetic clinic about trialing different products. In this article I talked about a couple of Ossur products, but there are several other manufacturers out there who have comparable products to check out.

The internet is a good place to start and most manufacturers have pretty detailed information on their websites that tell you all about their prosthetic products. Of course, they will tell you about the features and benefits, but not always whether or not they are appropriate for you. Fellow amputees are often another excellent resource if they are using a product you are interested in trying. First hand opinions are helpful, but again, their requirements might be different to yours. To determine if a product is suitable, you

should always consult with your prosthetist in a certified clinic.

My purpose here is not to sell you on a foot. It is to sell you on awareness. As an amputee, I ask questions about my care. Heaps of them. (That is probably why I do what I do for work). I encourage you to do the same. This is merely an example of how to learn about your options and potentially “trade up” to a higher standard of care. But don't take my word for it – ask.

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First Published 2011
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