No one questions whether able-bodied people should have the right sports equipment. Of course they should.

People with limb loss need the right equipment even more. This includes special prostheses adapted (made) for certain sports and other activities. The problem is that insurance companies sometimes limit how much they will pay for these items. This can make it much harder for people with limb loss to get the prostheses they need.

“Unfortunately, limiting the availability of sports and recreation prostheses will have negative effects on society in the future,” says Derrick Stowell, youth activities program coordinator for the Amputee Coalition of America. “Studies show that youth with disabilities who are able to participate in sports are healthier and better adjusted socially. This means their healthcare costs will not be a burden for society.”
Amber Peterson is 4 years old. She is one of many youngsters helped by sports prostheses. When Amber was about 6 months old, she got her first passive prosthesis from the Shriners Hospital for Children in Minneapolis. This helped her to sit, balance, crawl and pull up to a standing position. (To learn more about Amber’s story, read “A Mother’s Perspective” in ACA’s inMotion magazine.)

Later, Amber got a myoelectric prosthesis (after a “little struggle” with the insurance company, says Amber’s mother Jennifer). But Amber could not use it when playing in the sandbox or water as doing so could harm the electronic parts. The Shriners Hospital then made Amber a special prosthesis.

Special prostheses are often modular. This means they have two or more components (parts) that can be attached. Some are made for just one person. Others are made by prosthetic companies (such as TRS) that produce lines of sports and special prostheses. These may have terminal-end devices for sports like baseball and basketball or components for kayaking, snow-skiing, windsurfing, and other outdoor activities. While components may be too big or heavy for small children, Jennifer Peterson says they are lucky to have more choices as Amber gets older.
Special prostheses are for more than just sports. Amber’s parents wanted her to take violin lessons. “Fortunately, a resident prosthetist at Shriners, Steven Jahn, had a tool and die background. He offered to custom-make a violin terminal device that was lightweight and also allowed passive ‘wrist’ motion, which is necessary for ‘normal’ bow arm movement when playing the violin. That terminal end has worked great for Amber, and, once again, it was provided free of charge.”

“We know that there are many children across the country who do not have the situation that we have of being close to a Shriners Hospital or of having good insurance,” Jennifer Peterson says. “We are thankful that Amber is able to have the opportunity to use prosthetic devices that will help her to succeed at the activities that she chooses in life. We feel that all children with limb differences should have the same accessibility and coverage for them to explore the world of prosthetics.”

Limbs for Life is another nonprofit organization that helps children and adults get needed prostheses. It is based in Oklahoma City and provides prosthetic care to about 700 amputees each year in the United States.
Six-year-old Connor Karow got a running foot from Limbs for Life. He was then able to take part in track and field competition as well as youth soccer. “It’s opened his life up and allowed him to be a normal little 6-year-old kid,” says Limbs for Life Executive Director Craig Gavras.

Limbs for Life helps many amputees obtain sports prostheses, even unique ones that have to be custom-made. “We had an older gentleman in Oklahoma who was a big-time fisher and hunter who was an arm amputee,” says Gavras. “So we helped him get a prosthesis that had adapters that change in and out, one that would hold his fishing rod.” They also helped him get a prosthesis shaped like a tripod to fit his rifle.

Gavras lost the use of his right leg while working as a police officer and later had it amputated. While he knows the value of having the right prosthesis, he also knows this is not always easy to explain to others. “It’s one of those things where most
insurance companies look at it as a luxury item,” he says. “A lot of people ask, ‘Why do you need a running foot?’ I say, ‘The best analogy I can give you is if you go to the store and buy a pair of shoes that you are going to wear for the next 3 years and never change them. Take into consideration that you will wear them summer, winter, rain, snow, whatever the conditions. That’s what we are doing with a prosthetic leg and foot. Amputees are expected to buy one foot that adapts to every circumstance.’ That’s what I try to tell people. It’s not a luxury.”

Gavras believes this type of thinking can help everyone – not just people with limb loss. He says that sports and recreation offer physical, psychological and social benefits. He says that exercising and staying healthy will help amputees avoid other health problems such as diabetes and obesity.

“In this economy, we are looking very short-term,” says Gavras. “We need to look long-term and say, ‘We can save $2,000 by not paying for this or we can save $20,000 in the long run by paying for it now.’ We really need to educate the public that for a couple of hundred or a couple of thousand dollars, a very simple adaptive piece of sports prosthetic equipment can have a huge impact on amputees’ lives. I
think if they look at the long-term cost, it would be much cheaper to get the adaptive equipment. It’s a small cost, but a big investment in the future of amputees to get this adaptive equipment.”

*Translated from The Importance of Sports Prostheses*