

What to Expect When You're Expecting an AFO

A Comprehensive Patient Guide

If you aren't already familiar with wearing braces called “ankle-foot orthoses”, or AFOs (as we will abbreviate throughout the document), it may be quite intimidating to know where to begin. At **Get Back UP Today** we have compiled information from hundreds of brace wearers—as well as from Allard USA, the industry leader in carbon composite AFO manufacturing—to give you the tools you'll need to feel confident in your choices and decisions about getting the best AFO for your needs.

OVERVIEW

What can an AFO do for me?

There are many benefits to wearing an AFO, not the least of which is restoring overall confidence and quality of life. More specifically, an AFO will help to:

- Prevent/correct damage caused by inefficient gait
- Reduce pain from uneven weight-bearing forces
- Assist balance
- Support better posture
- Reduce the chance of tripping & falling
- Restore proper gait mechanics
- Reduce fatigue
- Reduce energy cost of activities
- Reduce rate of muscle atrophy
- Promote higher levels & duration of activity

Am I ready for an AFO?

It's hard to say when it may be time to get an AFO because it's really a personal decision. Many people are concerned about the perceived stigma that comes with the use of such visible “medical equipment”, some are concerned about the possible financial burdens and still others are concerned about restriction of movement that may come with wearing bracing of any type. While these are all valid concerns, they should not prevent anyone from considering the real-life benefits an AFO can provide.

There can be significant benefits to getting an AFO sooner rather than later, especially if you have chronic or progressive conditions. Small imbalances or joint pains now can become very serious down the road—and many of these can be prevented by orthotic interventions.

As you weigh the pros and cons of wearing AFOs please ask yourself the following questions, and *if you can relate to 2 or more of these it may be time to at least start a conversation with an orthotist:*

- Are you stable walking or do you trip/fall often?
- Are you comfortable walking on uneven terrain?
- Do you have difficulty balancing?
- Can you manage stairs easily?
- Do you have difficulty standing for long periods of time?
- Do you experience persistent lower back, leg or foot pain?
- Can you walk considerable distances without significant fatigue, pain or other gait issues?
- Do you avoid certain activities/events due to mobility issues for fear of falling?
- Have mobility challenges affected your ability to succeed or move up in the workplace?
- Have mobility challenges affected participation in events with your friends or family?
- Does your family worry for your safety when walking/traveling independently?
- Are you interested in maintaining as much mobility as possible for as long as possible?
- Have you considered how going into a wheelchair or scooter prematurely may bring additional burden? (financial & health challenges, life-expectancy shortened, physical barriers and obstacles)

REMEMBER: Uncorrected gait and balance problems can lead to progression of further joint issues, muscle weakness and fatigue, increased risk for falls, and overall negative impact on quality of daily activities.

What is the best AFO?

The truth is that there is no ONE brace right for everyone, and no ONE brace can do everything you may want it to do.

We strongly encourage you to do as much independent research as possible when it comes to understanding the different types of AFOs available, and then discuss with your orthotist what options may be best for your particular needs before going home with the first option offered.

Recently the insurance industry has mandated that new AFOs will generally not be reimbursable unless it's been 5 years since you initially ordered one!

Be actively involved in the selection of your AFO and make sure it can “grow” with you to accommodate your needs as these may change significantly over 5 years’ time.

YOU'RE READY FOR AN AFO—NOW WHAT?

1. Begin by obtaining a prescription for an AFO from a medical doctor (MD). This can be your family doctor or any specialist that may be familiar with your condition or diagnosis. If you want to try an Allard AFO, the prescription needs to say “Allard AFO – No Substitutions” or you may be offered an alternate, even inferior, carbon composite AFO. This won't mean that you will have to stick with an Allard-only brace, it just means you will absolutely have the option to try one if you and your orthotist agree it may be a great fit for you.

2. Check with your insurance company to know if they will cover the whole or partial cost of your brace. If you don't have insurance discuss this with your orthotist BEFORE an initial fitting.

3. Make an appointment with a certified orthotist. If you do not have one, you can call 888-678-6548 for recommendations for a reliable and certified orthotist in your area, or contact Allard customer service: info@allardusa.com.

The orthotist/patient relationship is a very critical partnership, so it is imperative that you feel comfortable with your team and that you trust they have your best interests at heart for the long-term.

Here are some questions to consider when making your selection:

- Does orthotist take my insurance?
- Does the orthotist have experience fitting someone with my condition?
- Will I be able to try different kinds of AFOs?
- Will I be involved in the process of deciding how much support I need?
- Will they understand and support me in returning to the activities most important to me?
- Does the orthotist agree that is an ongoing partnership, or are they more focused on simply fulfilling my AFO prescription?

4. Do your research. We encourage you to go online to educate yourself about AFO options currently available, but this may seem overwhelming because there are literally hundreds of different models of AFOs on the market, all with different benefits and limitations.

YOUR FIRST APPOINTMENT: Being Prepared

- **Bring your prescription from a medical doctor.**
- **Prepare and take a list of what you are hoping an AFO will do for you**, as well as a list of activities/events that are important for you to get back to or continue taking part in.
- **Wear the shoes you wear most often** and bring along any other frequently worn shoes. The shoe is an integral component of the orthosis' fit and function. Your orthotist may recommend more "brace-friendly" shoes in order to get the best function and longevity from your AFO. Not to worry, there are plenty of great footwear options for AFO-wearers (check GetBackUPToday.com for our upcoming shoe guide).
- **Take any walking aids you currently use.**
- **If you have previously worn an AFO and still have it, take it.**
- **Discuss all of your mobility issues with your orthotist.** You may need additional bracing to address hyperextension/muscle weakness above the knee and/or other additional bracing to manage alignment/weakness below the knee.
- **Make sure your appointment covers everything—be thorough.** Your orthotist should perform a complete and relevant evaluation, discuss AFO options with you, discuss pricing and payment options and should be committed to having your best interests at the heart of all discussions.
- **Do your research beforehand.** Understand as best you can which AFO options are available, what customizations can be done, whether the brace manufacturers provide a "trial period" and be aware of any warranty options available. If you don't have this information be sure to ask your orthotist before committing to any AFO.
- **Be aware of insurance regulations.** You may not be able to get a different brace for up to 5 years; ask your orthotist what his/her experience has been because it is different from state to state and from provider to provider.
- **Know your rights and voice your concerns.** The orthotist should be your partner in this process! You don't have to keep the same orthotist if you aren't communicating well, however most orthotists are highly skilled and have a better understanding about what options may be best for your particular needs. You also don't have to go with the first brace your provider recommends—do your research before going home with a permanent (or 5-year) brace that may not be the best option after all. NOTE: to find additional practitioners in your area, visit www.bocusa.org or www.abcop.org
- **Select or request a "test brace" if possible.** Unfortunately, it is not possible to try every AFO on the market without first paying for them (whether via insurance or by out-of-pocket funds) but ask what options you may have. Allard, for one, offers discounted **NFR Kits** to Orthotists—**or Not For Resale AFOs**—which are intended to be used as in-office evaluation braces for patients to try. Additionally, your provider may have other samples for you to try on, if only to get a general feel for whether you think it these may be good options for you.
- **Understand which AFO will be ordered for you, and what your options are if you are unhappy with it.** Make sure that you were an equal partner in selecting the brace that you AND your orthotist believe to be the best fit. Ask your orthotist what your options will be if, upon receiving your AFO at your next appointment, you are not comfortable with it.

RECEIVING YOUR AFO

- Bring the same shoes you took to your initial visit, as well as a new pair if this was recommended.
- Try on your AFO in the presence of your orthotist—make sure you feel confident and secure; address any discomfort immediately. **NOTE: if you are trying an Allard AFO be sure to read “8-step Fitting Guide” for what to expect and to ensure that these steps are performed by your orthotist.** <https://www.getbackuptoday.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/8-step-Customization-Card-A101.pdf>
- Pay attention to the customizations that may be necessary and provide feedback for each one as far as comfort goes—your orthotists are not mind-readers, so it is vital that you speak up with any question or concern—See More about Customizations in Following Section.
- Follow all orthotist and brace manufacturer guidelines—and be sure to ask for the Patient Instructions that may accompany your AFO. Read these while in the presence of your orthotist in case you have questions **NOTE: All Allard AFOs include patient instructions but sometimes the orthotist takes these out of the bag and just gives you the brace.** Other brace manufacturers will vary so **always ask if there was information or accessories included with your AFO.**
- It is VERY IMPORTANT that the orthotist fills out and sends in warranty information immediately (if applicable) after providing you with your brace. Make sure you get a copy of the warranty and have understood “the fine print”. **NOTE: All Allard AFOs come with a Warranty and Patient Satisfaction Guarantee, this will vary for other brace manufacturers. Be sure to make note of the date that you receive the AFO and the expiration date of any Warranty or Patient Satisfaction policy.**

“CUSTOM” vs. “CUSTOMIZABLE”: Understanding the Industry

As consumers of the 21st century, we often expect an added value when goods are labeled “custom” or “custom made”. By definition, “custom-made” means “made to individual specifications” as opposed to products that are made in mass quantity for general consumption. In the world of orthotics these definitions—along with their perceptions—can be somewhat misleading. Basically, there are 3 classifications under which all orthoses fall:

Custom, Off-the-shelf/Prefabricated or Customizable Prefabricated.

Consider that from the beginning all AFOs were considered Custom. Back in the 1800s they were usually made from a combination of heavy, metal uprights and unwieldy leather strapping but by the latter part of the twentieth century more braces were being made solely of lighter-weight thermoplastics. Plastics were the industry standard for years until advancements in technology allowed for the mass manufacturing of prefabricated designs made from carbon or composite materials—the combinations of which have allowed for vast improvements in fit and function.

CUSTOM

Most often a **Custom AFO** begins with a cast or 3D scan of the lower leg, foot and ankle. Using that cast or scan, a brace is designed—most often from **rigid, thermoplastic materials**— to fit the exact anatomy. An orthotist may then make further modifications before the final fitting to optimize comfort.

OFF-THE-SHELF, PREFABRICATED

Off-the-shelf, Prefabricated (“Prefab” for short) AFOs are manufactured in quantity without a specific beneficiary in mind. Prefab AFOs come in varying designs and sizes and meant to be worn mostly “as is”. Usually these braces are made from a combination of materials, including metals, carbon, leather, Kevlar®, plastics and industrial fabrics and are not individualized to the end-user but rather are designed for ease of fit and use by a large variety of users. Due to convenience and cost, PreFab AFOs are often preferred by end-users when compared to the limitations of Custom Plastic AFOs.

CUSTOMIZABLE PREFABRICATED SHELLS

Lastly, there is a category of AFOs that combines the best of Custom and PreFab options: **Customizable PreFab “Orthotic Shells”**. These are also mass manufactured in varying designs and sizes but are intended to be customized to the individual upon being fitted by a certified orthotist. They are made from the same combination of materials as Off-The-Shelf PreFab AFOs, but an additional level of overall function and fit may be achieved utilizing a wide array of customization options.

So that’s a very basic breakdown of bracing; knowing what option is best for you will begin with an evaluation by an orthotist. Be mindful of the terminology and don’t assume that “custom” is necessarily better when “customizable” may actually offer higher levels of comfort and function. All 3 categories above *can be* customized to some degree, so it is important for you to understand the distinctions when meeting with your orthotist.

COMMON CUSTOMIZATIONS

The following customizations were compiled from Allard AFO-wearers in the Get Back UP Today community. Some of these strategies may be applied to other AFO models but every AFO is different so be sure to discuss all options with your orthotist.

- Go up a size for extra stability, down a size for more flexibility
- Trim footplate or top of anterior shell for more optimal performance & comfort
- Position the AFO more forward or back in the shoe for optimal fit and function
- Add heel wedge, lateral wedge, t-strap, SMO (ankle support) or metatarsal support to ensure proper foot and ankle alignment
- Select a different liner interface (See Allard interface options under “Long-term Comfort” below) for higher levels of activity or contact sensitivity
- Choose alternate strapping and lacing setups for weakness in arms or hands

Most orthotists will know how to customize AFOs specific to your needs but they are not mind-readers so be sure discuss any issues you may be experiencing.

When usual customizations are not enough for optimal comfort or function in an Allard brace, it is also possible to order a Custom ToeOFF® or BlueROCKER® for people that require a more intimate fit due to: Calf Atrophy/Hypertrophy, Unique Leg Shapes, Alignment Issues, Dynamic Response Changes, etc. This can be done by scanning, casting or measuring your leg/ankle/foot. Ask your orthotist or contact info@allardusa.com for more information.

YOUR FIRST 30 DAYS IN AN AFO

- **Make a follow up appointment with orthotist right away**—well within 30-days but with enough time to test your brace over multiple days; 1 week is optimal
- **Wear your brace only an hour or so at a time**, several times a day, in the first few days until you feel more comfortable wearing it longer
- **You may need time to adjust to activities in your new AFO**, be sure to practice in a safe space or with someone to assist you as you get more comfortable in the AFO
- **Immediately bring to the attention of your provider any of these issues:**
 - You continue to trip/fall
 - You feel any pain or discomfort from the orthosis or pressure from your shoes
 - You can't walk as far as you can without the AFO
 - You feel any pain or discomfort in your knees, hip, or back that you don't feel when not wearing the AFO
 - If you are wearing an Allard AFO, you start to feel you do not receive as much "push-off" assist as you initially did
- **Make written notes** of any discomfort/concerns you are having but also what feels better in your AFO during daily activities or what improvements you would like to see
- **Wear manufacturer-recommended interface** (Allard's are listed below)
- **Wear manufacturer-recommended footwear**
- **For Allard wearers: Know your Warranty Details and your Options** for swapping models/sizes within the 30-day "Patient Satisfaction" trial period if your original Allard AFO isn't working for your needs: <https://www.getbackuptoday.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Warranty-INFO-E112.pdf>
- **During your follow-up, speak up** to make sure you're getting the most out of your AFO

LONG-TERM COMFORT IN YOUR AFO

Over time you may experience changes in your body or in your environment that affect the overall comfort and function of your brace:

- If you lose or gain significant weight, the overall fit of your brace may need to be assessed
- If you experience big improvements in strength & activity level after your initial fitting you may need to make adjustments in the flexibility of your AFO
- If you experience deterioration in muscle strength or coordination you may need an AFO with more support than the model you were originally fitted with
- If you moved to a job that requires standing for long periods of time, your orthotist may want to suggest some changes

These are just a few examples of situations & conditions that may affect the fit of an AFO, but most everyone has seen the need for adjustments over time. As a general rule, it is important to keep the following in mind for the life of your AFO:

- **Make an appointment with your orthotist ASAP** If you have new discomfort caused or aggravated by your AFO
- **Consider wearing a compression sleeve/sock** for improving circulation and reducing friction/chafing/blisters.
- **Revisit the manufacturer's recommendations** regarding interfacing and proper footwear. *For Allard AFO-wearers, the SoftKIT™ interface most likely came with your AFO, but there are ComfortKIT™, GliderKIT™, ComfortPAD™ and CoverKIT™ options available as well to address both cosmetic and functional preferences, click here for more about Allard AFOs:*
<https://www.getbackuptoday.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Support-for-Better-Life-Allard-AFO.pdf>
- **Ask your orthotist for possible “easy fixes”** before searching for a new AFO, and look for the upcoming “Tips and Tricks Guide” at www.GetBackUPToday.com

DOs AND DON'Ts IN YOUR AFO

There is no ONE set of rules to cover all AFOs but here is a list of general recommendations:

DO

- **Wear socks to prevent blisters/rubbing/callouses**
- **Take precaution when going up and down stairs or on uneven terrain**
- **Ask your orthotist or care provider if custom orthotic insoles are right for you.** For most braces, it is recommended that you wear good, high quality insoles to promote optimal foot alignment and positioning, whether it is your custom orthotic insert those that came with the shoe.
- **Use care when switching your brace from shoe to shoe.** It is critical that you make sure the AFO is properly positioned in each shoe.
- **Visually Inspect the AFO and your skin daily.** Make sure there is no damage to the AFO, and that your skin has no red spots, soreness, blisters, callouses, rubbing or any other unusual marks.
- **Wear brace manufacturer-recommended footwear.**
- **Make notes about concerns or successes** as they happen so you'll be prepared if you need a follow-up visit to your orthotist

In addition to the above, Allard also recommends the following DO's for individuals wearing Allard AFOs:

DO

- **Use either a custom orthotic insole or the insole that came with the shoe over the footplate.**
- **Always wear socks with your AFO.**
- **Always use an Allard interface between your leg and the AFO.** Allard provides a SoftKIT™ interface with your AFO, but also has the ComfortKIT™, GliderKIT™, ComfortPAD™, and CoverKIT™.
- **Take precaution to go up and down stairs with entire foot planted firmly on each step,** rather than putting weight on ball of foot or heel of foot only in order to reduce undue forces on the brace.
- **Take caution not to twist or yank the brace by the strut** but rather lift it from the footplate and make certain it is properly positioned switching your brace from shoe to shoe.
- **Be sure the AFO is properly positioned** when switching it from shoe to shoe, this positioning is critical and may vary for different footwear styles.

DON'T

- Ignore Brace Manufacturer Instructions!!!
- **Don't assume you can do activities exactly as before;** make sure to practice your usual activities in a safe space until you are used to your new AFO.
- **Don't move your AFOs into different footwear without ensuring proper positioning** of brace in shoe as determined by your orthotist.

*In addition to the above, Allard also recommends the following **DONT's** for individuals wearing Allard AFOs:*

DON'T

- **Yank or Twist your brace by the strut** when taking it out of the shoe, this may damage the AFO
- **Perform squats or deep-knee bends** as this will put undue pressure on AFO and may shorten life-expectancy of your AFO. (If you must do a PARTIAL squat, undue the top strap of the brace in order to decrease undue forces/stress on the brace.)
- **Go up and down stairs by putting all your weight on the ball of foot;** this will put undue forces on the brace. Rather, put your whole foot on the stair.

CONCLUSION



We understand that wearing an AFO can be psychologically and physically challenging, especially if this is something totally new to you. If you are uncomfortable about the perceived stigma that wearing braces or using canes may bring, it may be helpful to engage in online community forums with other brace-wearers to see that you are not alone on this journey. And, while some activities may be difficult to adjust to at first—like driving, walking downhill, or carrying heavy objects while on uneven terrain—you'll find that with a bit of practice or adjustment you may be more effective in all of your activities, if only after a slight learning curve. What we hope you take away from this guide is this:

Wearing an AFO can promote life-changing improvements and can lead to an increase in the amount of activities you are able to engage in.

Additionally, most AFO wearers see a ***decrease in pain*** from corrections in gait and posture, they ***tire less easily*** because the brace is now doing part of the work for them, and they have a ***better sense of balance*** which leads to ***greater confidence*** throughout daily activities. Wearing an AFO can also help ***prevent premature damage*** to joints, soft tissue and bones down the road and can ***keep you more active for much longer***. Research has proven that the longer we stay ambulatory the greater we increase our life-expectancy.

With many long-term brace wearers reporting a better quality of life due directly to their AFOs, we feel you owe it to yourself to find out if an AFO is right for you.

We wish you well on your journey and are happy to answer anything that may not have been covered here, simply submit your inquiry to:

www.getbackuptoday.com/contact