

Walking Aids

Your health condition, size and age are key considerations when selecting a walking aid along with comfort, ease of use, stability and safety. Consult your physiotherapist if you require assistance in selecting a walking aid that is right for you.

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What are walking aids?

Walking aids are tools you can use to maintain your mobility and independence. A walking aid is used to:

- Decrease the effort and energy required to walk
- Decrease the weight on an injured, fragile or weak leg
- Compensate for a lack of balance
- Reduce the risk of falls

Choosing the right walking aid

There are many types of walking aids. The three main categories are:

- Crutches: Standard (underarm brace), and Canadian (forearm brace)
- Canes: Standard, 3-point, and 4-point
- Walkers: Standard, 2-wheeled, and 4-wheeled (with or without a seat)

Adjusting your walking aid

Once the proper walking aid is selected, correct adjustment and proper footwear are essential to promote good posture and energy use and prevent injury while walking.

Before you get moving, select footwear that is safe and supportive. When adjusting the height of your walking aid, wear the footwear you plan to use when walking.

Cane

Hold the cane in the hand opposite your weak or injured side to maintain proper arm swing, improve weight shifting, and encourage a normal walking pattern. When measuring the proper height of the cane, stand tall and place the tip of the cane on the floor, approximately 15 centimetres away from your foot. With arms resting comfortably at your sides, adjust the height of the cane so that its handle is level with your wrist crease.

Crutches

Stand tall and place the tips of both crutches on the floor, approximately 15 centimetres from the side of each foot. With arms resting comfortably at your sides, adjust the height of the crutches to maintain 5 centimetres of space (or three fingers breadth) between your armpit and the top of the crutch. Once the crutches are measured for the proper height, adjust the crutch handles so that they are level with your wrist creases.

Walker

With the walker firmly on the floor, stand tall and place both heels in line with the back legs or back wheels of the walker. Adjust the height of the walker so that its handles are in line with your wrist.

Using a walking aid

Stairs – Up with the strong, down with the weak!

Stairs should be managed one step at a time. When climbing stairs, lead with the stronger leg then follow with the weaker leg and cane or crutch (up with the strong). When going down stairs, the weak leg goes first. One hand should hold the stair rail and the other hand should hold the crutch or cane, always moving it in time with the weak leg (down with the weak).

Sitting – Nose over toes!

If sitting down is difficult for you, look for a chair with armrests. Turn your back to the chair and step backward until you feel the chair touch your legs. Then, reach back with one of your hands to grab the armrest of the chair and lower yourself slowly until you are sitting.

When getting up from the chair, position your crutches or cane within easy reach or place the walker in front of you with the brakes in a locked position. Slide forward until you are sitting on the edge of the chair, lean forward (nose over toes) and stand up using the chair's armrests to push off. Do not use your walking aid to pull yourself up since it is likely to tip over and cause injury.

A rolling walker equipped with a seat allows you to take a break when walking. When preparing to sit, position the walker in front of a wall (or other solid structure), apply the brakes, turn around and slowly sit down using the handles for support.

To stand, push off both of the walker handles. Once standing, turn around slowly, remove both brakes and resume your walk.

Physiotherapy Can Help

Your physiotherapist will:

- Assist you with your initial fitting to ensure your safety and comfort.
- Help you decide when to progress to a different walking aid or discontinue use
- Provide information on where to purchase a cane or walker, and if you qualify, assist you in securing funding to pay for your equipment.
- Recommend simple modifications to your environment such as removing small area rugs or rearranging furniture to help you walk safely in your home and avoid injury.
- Suggest modifications to your walking aid, such as an ice pick for your cane during the winter, to help you adjust to changes in weather or walking surfaces and stay active year round.

The Canadian Physiotherapy Association (CPA) represents physiotherapists, physiotherapist assistants and physiotherapist students across Canada. CPA members are rehabilitation professionals dedicated to the health, mobility and fitness of Canadians.

Physiotherapists are primary health care professionals who combine their in-depth knowledge of the body and how it works with specialized hands-on clinical skills to assess, diagnose and treat symptoms of illness, injury or disability.

More than 20,000 registered physiotherapists work in Canada, in private clinics, general and rehabilitation hospitals, community health centres, residential care and assisted-living facilities, home visit agencies, workplaces, and schools.