

How to Use Crutches, Canes, and Walkers

If you break a bone in your leg or foot, have a procedure on your knee or lower leg, or suffer a stroke, your doctor may recommend that you use a walking aid while you are healing or recovering. Using crutches, a cane, or a walker can help keep your weight off your injured or weak leg, assist with balance, and enable you to perform your daily activities more safely.

When you are first learning to use your walking aid, you may wish to have a friend or family member nearby to help steady you and give you support. In the beginning, everything you do may seem more difficult. With just a few tips and a little practice, though, most people are able to quickly gain confidence and learn how to use a walking aid safely.

Make Your Home Safer

Making some simple safety modifications to your home can help prevent slips and falls when using your walking aid:

- Remove throw rugs, electrical cords, food spills, and anything else that may cause you to fall.
- Arrange furniture so that you have a clear pathway between rooms.
- Keep stairs clear of packages, boxes, or clutter.
- Walk only in well-lit rooms and install a nightlight along the route between your bedroom and the bathroom.
- In the bathroom, use nonslip bath mats, grab bars, a raised toilet seat, and a shower tub seat.
- Simplify your household to keep the items you need within easy reach and everything else out of the way.
- Carry things hands-free by using a backpack, fanny pack, or an apron with pockets.

Crutches

If your injury or surgery requires you to get around without putting any weight on your leg or foot, you may have to use crutches.

Proper Positioning

- When standing up straight, the top of your crutches should be about 1-2 inches below your armpits.
- The handgrips of the crutches should be even with the top of your hip line.
- Your elbows should be slightly bent when you hold the handgrips.
- To avoid damage to the nerves and blood vessels in your armpit, your weight should rest on your hands, not on the underarm supports.

Walking

Lean forward slightly and put your crutches about one foot in front of you. Begin your step as if you were going to use the injured foot or leg but, instead, shift your weight to the crutches. Bring your body forward slowly between the crutches. Finish the step normally with your good leg. When your good leg is on the ground, move your crutches ahead in preparation for your next step. Always look forward, not down at your feet.

Sitting

To sit, back up to a sturdy chair. Put your injured foot in front of you and hold both crutches in one hand. Use the other hand to feel behind you for the seat of your chair. Slowly lower yourself into the chair. When you are seated, lean your crutches in a nearby spot. Be sure to lean them upside down—crutches tend to fall over when they are leaned on their tips.

To stand up, inch yourself to the front of the chair. Hold both crutches in the hand on your injured side. Push yourself up and stand on your good leg.

Stairs

To walk up and down stairs with crutches, you need to be both strong and flexible. Facing the stairway, hold the handrail with one hand and tuck both crutches under your armpit on the other side. When you are going up, lead with your good foot, keeping your injured foot raised behind you. When you are going down, hold your injured foot up in front, and hop down each step on your good foot. Take it one step at a time. You may want someone to help you, at least at first. If you encounter a stairway with no handrails, use the crutches under both arms and hop up or down each step on your good leg, using more strength.

If you feel unsteady, it may be easier to sit on each step and move up or down on your bottom. Start by sitting on the lowest step with your injured leg out in front. Hold both crutches flat against the stairs in your opposite hand. Scoot your bottom up to the next step, using your free hand and good leg for support. Face the same direction when you go down the steps in this manner.



If you are unable to bear any weight on your leg or foot, you may have to use crutches.

©Thinkstock, 2015

Canes

A cane can be helpful if you have minor problems with balance or stability, some weakness in your leg or trunk, an injury, or a pain. If you are elderly, using a single point cane may help you to walk more comfortably and safely and, in some cases, may make it easier for you to continue living independently.

Proper Positioning

- When standing up straight, the top of your cane should reach to the crease in your wrist.
- Your elbow should be slightly bent when you hold your cane.
- Hold the cane in the hand opposite the side that needs support. For example, if your right leg is injured, hold the cane in your left hand.

Walking

To start, set your cane about one small stride ahead of you and step off on your injured leg. Finish the step with your good leg.

Stairs

To climb stairs, place your cane in the hand opposite your injured leg. With your free hand, grasp the handrail. Step up on your good leg first, then step up on the injured leg. To come down stairs, put your cane on the step first, then your injured leg and then, finally, your good leg, which carries your body weight.



A cane can help if you have minor problems with balance or stability or weakness in your leg or trunk.

©Thinkstock, 2015

Walkers

If you have had total knee or total hip replacement surgery, or you have another significant problem, you may need more help with balance and walking than you can get with crutches or a cane. A pickup walker with four legs will give you the most stability. A walker lets you keep all or some of your weight off of your lower body as you take steps. With a walker, you use your arms to support some of your body weight. As your strength and endurance get better, you may gradually be able to carry more weight in your legs.

Positioning

- When standing up straight, the top of your walker should reach to the crease in your wrist.
- Your elbows should be slightly bent when you hold the handgrips of the walker.
- Keep your back straight. Don't hunch over the walker.
- Check to be sure the rubber tips on your walker's legs are in good shape. If they become uneven or worn, you can purchase new tips at a drug store or medical supply store.



If you have had total knee or total hip replacement, a walker will provide the most stability.

©Thinkstock, 2015

Walking

First, position your walker about one step ahead of you, making sure that all four legs of the walker are on even ground. With both hands, grip the top of the walker for support and move your injured leg into the middle area of the walker. Do not step all the way to the front. Push straight down on the handgrips of the walker as you bring your good leg up so it is even with your injured leg. Always take small steps when you turn and move slowly.

Sitting

To sit, back up until your legs touch the chair. Use your hands to feel behind you for the seat of the chair. Slowly lower yourself into the chair.

To stand up, push yourself up using the strength of your arms and grasp the walker's handgrips. Do not pull on or tilt the walker to help you stand up.

Stairs

Never climb stairs or use an escalator with your walker.

Last reviewed: February 2015

AAOS does not endorse any treatments, procedures, products, or physicians referenced herein. This information is provided as an educational service and is not intended to serve as medical advice. Anyone seeking specific orthopaedic advice or assistance should consult his or her orthopaedic surgeon, or locate one in your area through the AAOS ["Find an Orthopaedist"](#) program on this website.

Copyright 2015 American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons

Related Articles

Activities After Hip Replacement (<http://orthoinfo.aaos.org/topic.cfm?topic=A00356>)

Activities After Knee Replacement (<http://orthoinfo.aaos.org/topic.cfm?topic=A00357>)

Care of Casts and Splints (<http://orthoinfo.aaos.org/topic.cfm?topic=A00095>)

Related Resources

Video: About Casts ()

OrthoInfo

The American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons
9400 West Higgins Road
Rosemont, IL 60018
Phone: 847.823.7186
Email: orthoinfo@aaos.org