

## Choosing the Right Cane or Walker

Canes and walkers help people with pain, weakness, and balance problems walk more safely and comfortably. They also may help some people avoid falls. There are many different types of canes, walkers, and other assistive devices available, so it's very important to 1) work with a healthcare provider (physical therapist, doctor, nurse) to choose the correct type of walking aid for you, 2) have the cane or walker sized so it fits you correctly, and 3) get help learning how to use it the right way

In most cases, canes and walkers are reimbursable

through Medicare and other insurers. For more information, download our **Which Should I**

**Choose?** free Tip Sheet on Falls Prevention



available at HealthinAging.org.

If you feel you need a cane or walker, talk to your healthcare provider to make sure you get the device that is best for you. When deciding between a cane or walker, discuss the following points with your healthcare provider:

|  | Canes  | Walkers   |
|--|--|---|
| What is the main reason you need the device?             | Arthritis or pain, especially of the knees and hips, and on one side.<br>Mild balance problems.<br>Injuries to one foot or leg.  | Arthritis or pain (especially of the knees and hips) on both sides.<br>Medium to bad balance and gait problems.<br>General weakness or weakness of both legs.   |
| How much of your weight does the device need to support? | You can support up to <b>25%</b> of your weight with a cane.   | You can support up to <b>half</b> of your weight with some walkers.   |
| Most common types  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Single point canes can help with early balance problems.</li> <li>• Four point or "quad" canes add more stability and help even more with balance.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Standard walkers need to be picked up to move forward.</li> <li>• Front-wheeled walkers don't need to be picked up, so they use less energy.</li> <li>• Rolling 4-wheeled walkers give support and come with or without seats and brakes.</li> </ul> |

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|-----------------------------|---|---|
|                             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seat canes have small attached seats so you can take a rest while using it.</li> </ul>   |   |
| Other things to think about | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All canes must have a non-skid rubber tip.</li> <li>• Curved, rounded, or grip handles help with balance and to lower stress on your hand.</li> <li>• Canes are not as stable as walkers.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Walkers should have rubber grips for your hands so they don't slip.</li> <li>• Front-veeled walkers must have nonskid tips on the back legs.</li> <li>• Walkers cannot be used on stairs.</li> </ul> |

## How to Get a Proper Fit for Your Cane or Walker

The correct length of a cane or walker is measured from the wrist to the floor.

### To measure:

- Wear your normal shoes. ■ Let your arm hang loosely at your side.
- Ask someone else to measure the distance from your wrist to the floor.
- This measurement should be about the same as the distance from the floor to the point where your leg bone fits into your hip socket.
- Have your cane or walker adjusted so that the top of it is that same distance from the floor.
- Aluminum canes and most walkers are adjusted by pushing in buttons on each side and sliding the tubing to the new length until the buttons lock in place.
- Wood canes can be cut to size.
- Put your hand on the cane or walker handle. If the length is correct, you will notice a 20-degree to 30-degree bend in the elbow. (If your upper arm is at 12 o'clock, your hand points to 5 o'clock.)

If your cane or walker does not feel right, ask your physician or physical therapist to check the fit.

## 5 Steps to Safely Using Your Cane

1. Use the cane on the opposite side of your injury, pain, or weakness (unless your healthcare provider tells you not to).
2. Put all of your weight on your good leg.
3. Move the cane and your bad leg a comfortable distance forward.
4. With your weight supported on both your cane and your bad leg, step through with your good leg.
5. Place your cane firmly on the ground before you take a step. Do not place your cane too far ahead of you, or it could slip from under you.

## 5 Steps to Safely Using Your Walker

1. Stand with your toes halfway between the front and back tips or wheels. Roll or lift your walker a step's length ahead of you.
2. Place the walker firmly on the ground. Do not place your walker too far ahead of you, or it could slip from under you.
3. Lean slightly forward, and hold the arms of the walker for support.
4. Take a step.
5. Repeat the cycle: Place your walker firmly on the ground (or roll it ahead of you), then take a step.

### Get Non-Skid Rubber Tips for Your Cane or Walker

Non-skid rubber tips help keep you from slipping. Check tips often and change them if they look worn. These tips are available through your local pharmacy or medical supply store.

*On carpeted surfaces, tennis balls cut and placed on the rubber tips can be helpful for ease of movement.*



*DISCLAIMER:* This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other healthcare provider. Always consult your healthcare provider about your medications, symptoms, and health problems. January 2016

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