

# USING A WALKER OR CANE AND NAVIGATING STAIRS



So many people use canes or walkers these days that it's easy to forget that it may take some time and practice to learn how to use them correctly and safely. Using the instructions in this video, you may want to try using a cane or walker yourself before helping your family member.

## Using a Cane

- > If there is an injury or weakness on one side of the body, the cane should be held on the person's stronger side to support the weaker leg.
- > The cane and the weaker leg should move forward together.
- > If the person's problem is balance, the cane should be held in the dominant hand; for example, a right-handed person should hold the cane in the right hand.

## Upstairs/Downstairs with a Cane

- > Going up stairs (just a few or a whole flight of stairs), the strong leg goes first, followed by the cane, and finally the weaker leg.
- > Going down stairs, the process is different. Lead with the cane, then the weaker leg, and finally the stronger leg.
- > One way to remember this is the phrase: "Up with the good and down with the bad."

## Using a Walker

- > A walker is more stable than a cane, but it may be harder to manage.
- > Getting up from a chair is a lot easier if the chair has arms for support. Try to have armchairs where the person is likely to sit.
- > Before the person starts to get up, make sure there are no obstructions in front of the walker.
- > The handles should be level with the person's hips.
- > Lead with the weaker side, using the strong leg as an anchor.
- > Walkers should not be used on stairs.

## Choosing the Right Cane or Walker

- > All these tips are most effective when the person has the best cane or walker to compensate for their particular weakness.

- > Many types of canes and walkers are available, and a physical therapist, nurse, or doctor can help with the choice. Aluminum canes and most walkers can be adjusted to fit the person.
- > A cane with a single point can help with early balance problems, but a four-point or "quad" cane offers more stability. All canes should have a nonskid rubber tip.
- > Standard walkers have to be picked up to move forward, but front-wheeled walkers do not. Some walkers have seats and brakes.

## Costs

Canes and walkers are called "durable medical equipment," or DME. DME is covered by Medicare, Medicaid, and most insurance plans if a doctor certifies that the equipment is "medically necessary." However, insurance may pay for only basic, not customized, equipment.

## Additional Resources

- > "[Choosing the Right Cane or Walker](#)" is a guide prepared by HealthinAging.org, a foundation of the American Geriatrics Society. It covers features to look for, how to get a proper fit, and steps for the safe use of canes and walkers.
- > The Mayo Clinic has created a [slide show about choosing and using a cane](#) and a similar one on [walkers](#).
- > For more information on durable medical equipment, see the "Next Step in Care" family caregiver's guide at [www.nextstepincare.org/Caregiver\\_Home/Durable\\_Medical\\_Equipment/](http://www.nextstepincare.org/Caregiver_Home/Durable_Medical_Equipment/), which is free and available in four languages.
- > For veterans and caregivers of veterans, visit [www.caregiver.va.gov](http://www.caregiver.va.gov) or call 1-855-260-3274 for more information about resources and support.

AARP Public Policy Institute

Prepared by Carol Levine, United Hospital Fund