

Choosing a Walker

Over the last several years, walkers have improved considerably in their design and function. These advantages are recognized, and in North America, there are more walker users than wheelchair users. Usually, therapists recommend walkers, but now, many people are in a position of making the decision of which walker to choose – either for themselves or a family member. There are many different types of walkers, so the following is a guide to give you a little more clarity.

Who uses a walker? By far, most are people over 65 years old and generally with problems that are **musculo-skeletal** (muscle/bone) or **neurological**. Most users have arthritis mainly in their knees and hips, have fractured a bone, are post surgical or are recovering from a debilitating illness. A walker is seen as a mobilizer and pain reliever. With osteoporosis, the spinal bones may be deteriorating and are not able to hold up the back, resulting in a stooped posture and weakened muscles. In both cases, weight bearing can be directed through the arms to the walker allowing a more natural gait and body position. In someone who has a neurological condition such as Multiple Sclerosis, Parkinson's, or Hemiplegia, a walker allows greater stability and balance as well as maintaining muscle strength. Generally, choosing a walker for them would be under the guidance of a therapist as their needs vary so greatly.

Why use a walker? Of course the main reason is for mobility, but the following reasons will help you determine the correct walker to use.

1) Balance

“Postural Sway” (constant muscle correction to keep balanced and upright) increases with age, and people tend to take lateral steps and widen their base to increase their stability. They can be more at risk of falling. A walker is used to give them a wider base of support when they walk to help them overcome the postural sway.

2) Weight Bearing

Some people are not able to tolerate the body's full weight through their legs due to pain or weakness. A walker lets the arms assist by pushing down on the frame. This allows more correct posture and gait.

3) Endurance

A walker can be used as an energy saver if a person has heart disease, breathing restrictions or fatigues quickly.

What type of walker? Here is a guide to the walkers most used for home use. Don't let price determine your choice. Cheaper versions are just that – cheap. Some of the features in a more expensive walker are worth the extra expense.

1) Basic Frame with rubber tips – no wheels

This walker provides the most support and stability. By being “steady” and not moving much, it helps you control your own body and learn to be upright. More of your weight can be supported through your arms with less weight on your legs. Because it gives more support, it must be picked up and moved before every step. The gait or

walking rhythm is not smooth, but at this stage it is more important to have stability. Advantage: Good for moving very short distances and transferring from one chair to another. Trays are available for carrying small items. Disadvantage: Not recommended for walking distances.

2) Basic Frame with two 5” wheels at front and 2 glides at back

This walker assumes you have more mobility and can take more of your body weight through your legs. It is easier on your arms and the walking steps are more natural. The walker still gives a lot of support as you can stand within the frame, but instead of “lifting” the walker, you just “push” it forward. It slides as you walk, rolling easily on the front wheels while the back glides slow the movement and controls the speed. This walker allows a more normal gait pattern and is the most common walker used for indoors. Advantage: Takes up less space when maneuvering in the house and folds for storage. Good on carpets. Trays are available for carrying small items. Disadvantage: Not good for outdoor use as small wheels can get stuck causing tripping on the rougher terrain.

3) Walker with 4 wheels, seat and braking system

a. There are some lighter, versions with wheels available for indoor use that can be taken outdoors. Generally, the users of these walkers are more independent and need the walker for balance or weakened bones (osteoporosis) and the weight of a normal walker would be too heavy. (Lightweight walkers are under 15 lbs). A 3-wheeled walker is not recommended as it can tip. Advantage: these walkers are lighter and easier to fit into the back of a car. Disadvantage: Because the walker is light, if a lot of force is needed to sit down on it, the walker may slip backwards.

b. Regular “Rollator” walker is generally around 20 lbs. and there are many to choose from. Look for well-constructed frames with large 8” wheels, comfortable, adjustable handgrips with easy to manage hand breaks, adjustable back supports, seats available in different heights and a carry basket. Some of the better walkers have a seat that folds up when in use so you can move into the frame. Others have the wheels wider at one end so the user does not trip on the frame if they have a wide-stance. Slow down brakes attached to the wheels are also helpful if hand strength alone does not fully operate the brake. Extras include oxygen tank holders, trays etc. As the walker has a seat, the user can walk a longer distance and sit down when tired. Also these walkers can be used as an exerciser by increasing the distance and speed walked daily and thus improving endurance and strength. Disadvantage: Can be very bulky for indoor use.

How do I measure a walker?

Make sure the person wears well fitting shoes that they will be using.

A frame walker with or without wheels, allows the person to move into the walker and be more upright when they walk. So a quick measure is to have them stand within the frame with their arm at their side. The handgrip should just come to their wrist crease.

When the arm is then positioned on the handgrip, the elbows will be roughly at 15 degrees. The arm is strongest in this position for pushing down. If shoulders are elevated, the walker is too high. Often people using a frame walker push it too far ahead of them and thus walk bent over.

A rollator walker will not allow as much weight to be taken through the arms, so the wrist crease method is just a guideline. Look more at the persons' posture. Are they erect or bent over? Sometimes the walker must be raised to support their upper body. Are their feet hitting the walker frame when they walk? The walker frame may be too narrow for them. The height of the seat is important as it is easier to get up from a higher seat, but it is also important to have the feet touching on the ground. Often public benches are too low for people to use so the correct seat height of the walker is important.

How do I encourage correct walker use?

It is important to observe how a person is walking. Look at their posture – does it improve with the walker? Look at their gait. How wide apart are their feet? What are the steps like? Encourage them to not shuffle by lifting their feet and moving into or closer to the walker. Does the walker allow them to have more rhythm in their gait or are they still shuffling? Even if someone is using a cane, the use of an outdoor “rollator” walker can help them improve strength, balance and overall well-being. Think of it as an “exercise treadmill”. When you increase the walking speed and the distance walked (by resting on your attached seat), you increase your strength and endurance. So abandoning your walker to progress to a cane isn't always advancement.

Walkers are phenomenal tools for people who want to maintain or improve function or are recovering from injury or illness. This beginners guide is only meant to assist in the selection of an appropriate walker. Of course, being guided by a therapist is recommended, but in the absence of professional assistance, having this knowledge will help in the correct choice of a walker and in the healing.

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