

Canes and Crutches

By Grace Young, OT, MS

Have you thought about using a cane but dismissed the idea because you'd be self-conscious? Think you'll look "disabled"? Figure that you've gotten along okay without walking aids so far, why start now?

Good question. But ask yourself if you're really getting along okay. Do you tire quickly when you walk? Is your gait unsteady? Does it take effort to keep your balance? Are you afraid of falling or do you fall easily? Do you cut outings short because walking takes too much effort? Do you reach out to hold onto stable objects as you walk?

If the answer is yes to any of these, you have good reason to try a walking aid. The experiment won't cost much and you might be able to borrow one for a trial run. Go to a full length mirror and watch yourself walking with and without the aid. Don't be surprised if the added support makes you look less disabled.

When muscles are weak, we compensate any way we can. This may include bending forward, leaning to one side, walking asymmetrically, or distorting the body in various ways. These compensations squander energy and can make you look more conspicuous. Canes or crutches can help you walk more normally and the extra bonus is having more energy to enjoy the fun stuff of life. When considering a walking aid, a cane may be adequate if you only need minimal support.

PICK THE RIGHT STICK

First determine the correct length of the cane. If it is too long and your elbow stays bent when you lean on the cane, the triceps muscle at the back of the elbow has to stay contracted. This can lead to muscle fatigue and shoulder pain. To prevent overworking the triceps, the cane handle should be at the height of the wrist when your arm is hanging at your side. This allows your elbow to straighten and "lock" itself in the straight position when you lean on the cane. Too short a cane isn't good either - you don't want to lean to the side.

A curved handle puts a lot of pressure in the middle of the palm, while a straight handle distributes the weight across the hand more evenly. Although a slight difference in diameter may seem trivial, a thicker cane does give more support than a thin one. Aluminum and carbon fiber canes are lighter than wood and have buttons for adjusting the height. The cane should be used on the side opposite the weaker leg to give a wider base of support. However, this may not work well if the opposite arm is weak. If both legs are equally weak you probably need more assistance than a cane provides. And if you're leaning too heavily on canes or crutches, you may need to consider using a wheelchair or scooter at least part of the time, to relieve the stress on your shoulders and back.

Underarm crutches provide more support and stability than a cane, but can cause damage to nerves in the armpit if you lean on them too much. Thick crutch pads that slip over the arm rest offer comfort and added protection from too much pressure. Many other devices - including padded hand grips and larger crutch tips - offer additional assistance for comfort and safety.

Forearm crutches, also called Lofstrand or Canadian crutches, have a handle and a metal or plastic cuff just below the elbow which gives support without putting pressure in the armpit. Here again, the crutch handle should be at wrist height to enable you to straighten and "lock" your elbow when you bear weight on the device.

Okay, now that you've watched yourself walking in a mirror, do you still think the walking aid makes you look more disabled?

Reprinted from the "Disabled 2 Abled" Grace R. Young's website and Blog.