Getting around can become challenging as you age. An elderly person who has difficulty walking may experience reduced safety, increased fall risk, and decreased independence. Losing independence affects an aging adult's quality of life and their ability to age in place.

Assistive devices like walkers are designed to support walking and improve safe mobility. There are several types of walkers available, and choosing the correct one depends on mobility needs. Learn about the options so you can choose the best fit for you.

Types of walkers

Walkers provide a wider base of support (BOS), enhancing stability during walking. They also help distribute some of the load from the legs, which can be beneficial for seniors with endurance issues.

There are two main types of walkers, with wheels and without. Within the two categories are several variations, so let's discuss the details of each to determine which walker is best for each situation.

Standard walker

[supporting image]

Standard walkers are **ideal for elderly people who require the most support and stability while walking**. Seniors with balance problems, leg weakness, or after having a lower body surgery like a knee replacement are likely better suited with a four-leg standard walker.

- It has four legs and no wheels.
- It has a lightweight frame that is usually foldable for easier transport.
- It is the most stable option because it cannot roll away.
- It requires a moderate amount of upper body strength because it must be picked up and moved with each stride.

Two-wheeled walker

[supporting image]

A two-wheeled walker is a more mobile option **for a senior who moves around slowly and needs minimal to moderate assistance** to walk safely. This type of walker may work well for the elderly with mild balance issues or mobility problems due to arthritis.

- It has two wheels on the front legs and no wheels on the rear legs.
- It offers minimal to moderate support.
- It allows more maneuverability than a standard walker.
- The caster wheels are typically five inches in diameter and are meant for indoor use or level outdoor surfaces.

- The rear legs can be modified by adding gliders that look like tiny skis to allow smoother movement when walking.
- One downside of caster wheels is that they only roll forward and backward.

Four-wheeled walker

[supporting image]

A four-wheeled walker is also known as a rollator. It provides the least support of those mentioned in this piece. It's a walker **used by seniors who can walk at a quicker pace but have some minor balance, endurance, or weakness problems** and need light support.

- Rollators have larger wheels, eight inches or more, that swivel.
- They are the best walkers for outdoor use and can roll over uneven terrain.
- They provide continuous support when walking.
- Rollators have hand brakes for safety on inclines or declines.
- One downside for the elderly with arthritis is that it may be challenging to apply the hand break.

Three-wheeled walker

[supporting image]

A tripod or three-wheeled walker is **similar to a four-wheeled rollator concerning mobility**.

- The base is smaller so it’s better for tight spaces.
- Three large wheels are good for outdoor terrain and turning.
- It has hand brakes for slowing and stopping.

Rolling walker with seat

[supporting image]

Walkers with seats for the elderly **can assist them with energy expenditure**. Simply stop walking, turn around, sit on the seat, and rest when tired. It is essential to lock the hand breaks before sitting down so the walker doesn’t roll during transitions when sitting and standing.

Rollators with seats can improve a senior’s self-efficacy since they can rest when out and about. Using this device could be the difference between being social outside the home or being home alone. Rollators with seats offer the same walking support as those without seats.

Knee walker

[supporting image]

A knee walker is not meant to be an assistive device for walking problems. It is mainly **used for recovery after leg injuries for people who cannot use crutches**. Knee walkers are similar to rollators except you stand on one leg and kneel on a platform with the injured leg.

- It is also called a knee scooter.

- Knee walkers have a hand brake.
- Most have four large wheels, but some may have three wheels.

Choosing the right walker

After learning about walker types, how to choose the right walker for a senior? The best assistive device is one that is the least cumbersome but most effective and user-friendly for the elderly person to use safely.

For example, an aging adult with leg weakness may need moderate walking support, but a rollator would not be appropriate because it’s too mobile. The best choice would be a standard walker because it’s lightweight, supportive, and safer since it's the most stable. Choosing lightweight walkers for seniors with weaknesses improves their usage tolerance.

Specific questions a caregiver or senior should ask when choosing a walker are:

- How is this elder’s balance and strength?
- Does the senior need continuous support?
- Will the walker be used predominately indoors or outdoors?
- Can the elder understand how to use the walker correctly and safely?

When choosing between walkers and canes for seniors, the choice should always be safety-related. For older adults with memory loss who need walking assistance, a careful assessment

by a healthcare provider may be necessary. The senior's cognition regarding the ability to use a walker or cane affects their safety; therefore, health professionals should determine fall risk before choosing an assistive device. A doctor or physical therapist can perform a fall risk assessment to discover the best walker type.

How to properly fit a walker

Once you choose and purchase your walker, it must be fitted for your body correctly to attain optimal benefits and safety. If the walker is too high or too low for you, it becomes less effective support and negates the purpose.

1. Stand upright with arms relaxed next to your body.
2. Stand inside the walker.
3. The hand grip should be at the level of your wrist crease, where it bends.
4. With your hands on the walker grips, your elbow should be mildly bent at approximately a 15-degree angle.

That is the proper walker height. If not, you need to learn how to adjust the height of a walker.

Walkers have adjustable legs with pilot holes so they can be moved up or down. Many rollator walkers have an added tightening knob for extra security.

Walker use safety tips

Are walkers safe for seniors to use? The short answer is, yes, for most. Using walkers for seniors with balance problems provides a solution that improves mobility and safety.

Here are some tips for how to use a walker safely for seniors:

1. Choose the correct walker for the person's ability and mobility needs.
2. Make sure the walker is properly fitted for the person.
3. Provide detailed instructions for use including a teach-back scenario for optimal understanding. Demonstrate walker use in easy-to-understand steps. Then, ask the senior to perform the task sequence to ensure their comprehension.
4. Walk inside the walker's frame. Do not push the walker out in front of you like a shopping cart.
5. Remove all barriers to moving the walker safely in the home such as rugs and clutter around doorways. Move any item that can hinder safe walking with a walker in the home.
6. Conduct regular maintenance for optimal safety and performance especially with rollators having brakes and rubber tips on standard four-leg walkers.

Additional considerations

Additional considerations must be taken for special circumstances such as larger-sized seniors or those with one-sided weaknesses. The elderly population often deals with visual and hearing impairments, which can lead to safety concerns. It is ideal to **consult with a physical therapist, device professional, or physician** to determine the safest option for an assistive device.

Choosing a bariatric walker for a larger-sized person is an option to consider for proper fit and optimal performance. These walkers have a wider and stronger base to support body weights above 300 pounds.

Seniors having after-effects from a stroke may have weakness only on one side of their body. A hemi-walker is a potential assistive device in this case if it were deemed safe for them. This walker has an A-frame and a smaller base to use on the strong side of the body.

Modifications can be added to walkers for seniors with arthritis. Larger hand grips help decrease pain in the hand and wrist. Forearm platforms can be attached to a walker to defer the main support to the forearms instead of the hands and wrists.

One final bit of additional information regarding **insurance coverage**: Medicare will cover the cost of a walker if prescribed by a doctor or other medical provider and deemed as "medically necessary", per Medicare.gov. There are specifics involved so make sure you check with your provider and the equipment supplier that they are Medicare-approved. Other insurance companies may cover certain types

of walkers, but it's advisable to contact them about your plan's medical goods coverage.

In summary, the **most important consideration regarding assistive devices is safety**. The priority must be for the well-being of the elderly. A walker is a valuable tool that can assist mobility, improve safety, and build confidence to continue daily task performance and attend social outings. Promoting senior independence by utilizing assistive devices is essential to improving their quality of life.

FAQ

Is it safe for a senior to use a walker?

Yes, walkers are safe for most seniors provided they are properly assessed for type and fit. Those with memory problems or severe balance and weakness might be exceptions due to safety issues and potential fall risk.

How do you choose the right walker?

Choosing the right walker is determined by establishing the needs of an elderly person. How much support does the senior require? How strong are they? Can they understand how to use it safely? Where will the walker be used mostly? These are essential questions for a safe and appropriate choice.

Why is proper walker fitting important?

The proper fit for a senior's body is important **because it enhances safety and mobility by properly supporting the body** in an upright posture during walking. Improper height would be ineffective for support and can increase fall risk.

Key takeaways:

- Seniors with balance and mobility problems should consider using an assistive device such as a walker for support and increased safety while walking.
- There are several types of walkers, with and without wheels, each providing variable support and maneuverability.
- Choosing the right walker for your needs, having it properly fitted to your body, and learning how to use it safely is important to obtain the most effective support and safety.
- Using a walker can improve a senior's mobility and confidence to maintain their quality of life and independence for longer.

Resources:

1. Mobility assistive device use in older adults.
2. Assistive devices for balance and mobility: benefits, demands, and adverse consequences.
3. Impact of different types of walking aids on the physiological energy cost during gait for elderly individuals with several pathologies and dependent on a technical aid for walking influence of the type of walker on the physiological cost of walking in elderly polypathological and dependent individuals walking aid.
4. Physical therapist clinical reasoning in home care for walking assistive device prescription: a description of practice.
5. Development, reliability and validity of the Safe Use of Mobility Aids Checklist (SUMAC) for 4-wheeled walker use in people living with dementia.