

Patient Safety Alert

File Number: 17/18-04

December 18, 2017

ENSURING SAFE USE OF FOUR-WHEELED WALKERS

Transporting a resident while they are seated on a four-wheeled walker has been identified as an unsafe practice. Four-wheeled walkers are not designed to transport residents/patients or to have them propel themselves while sitting on the seat.

There are some hybrid models specifically designed to transport residents/patients but these are not commonly used within Saskatchewan Health Authority facilities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Ministry of Health recommends the Saskatchewan Health Authority and health care organizations have policies and/or work standards in place to ensure:

- Wheeled walkers (including four-wheeled and two-wheeled) are used as walking aids **ONLY**;
- Residents and/or patients are discouraged from propelling the walker while sitting on the seat; and
- Staff never use a walker to transport a patient/resident.

Supporting Documents

1. Canadian Red Cross – Four Wheeled Walker
2. Mobility Basics – <https://mobilitybasics.ca/walking-aids/walkers>

Background of the Critical Incident

In November 2017, the former Sunrise Health Region notified the Saskatchewan Ministry of Health of an Occupational Health and Safety concern related to transporting residents on a four-wheeled walker. It was identified this was a common practice used in long term care facilities to transport residents for short distances. Similarly, residents had been known to propel themselves while sitting on a four-wheeled walker.

Walkers are designed as **walking aids only**. Using them for other purposes, such as transporting a client/resident, poses a threat to the individuals using them.

The additional weight when pushing someone seated on a four-wheeled walker could compromise the integrity of the device, resulting in the client/resident falling and increasing the risk of injury to the care provider.

Four-wheeled walker seats should only be used by clients/residents to temporarily sit (i.e., for a rest period) once the walker is stationary, by locking the brakes.

The Ministry of Health wishes to acknowledge the former Sunrise Health Region for sharing this “Near Miss” incident.

Patient Safety Alerts may be issued by the Ministry of Health following the review of at least one critical incident reported to the Ministry. A critical incident is defined as a serious adverse health event including, but not limited to, the actual or potential loss of life, limb or function related to a health service or a program operated by the Saskatchewan Health Authority (SHA), the Saskatchewan Cancer Agency or a health care organization.

The purpose of a Patient Safety Alert is to recommend actions that will improve the safety of patients who may be cared for under similar circumstances. Recommendations are intended to support the development of best practices and to act as a framework for improvement and can be adapted to fit the needs of the health service organization. When possible, policies or initiatives that have been developed by the SHA or the Saskatchewan Cancer Agency will be shared, to encourage adoption of similar policies or actions.

Patient Safety Alerts online: www.ehealthsask.ca/services/resources/Pages/Safety-Alerts.aspx

Four Wheeled Walker

These instructions are guidelines only. Use only as instructed by your healthcare provider.

What is a Four Wheeled Walker Used For?

A four wheeled walker is a lightweight frame that is used to provide walking support, with the added advantages of swivel front wheels and a temporary seat.

How Do I Adjust the Walker Height?

- Stand with your shoulders relaxed and your arms hanging loosely at your sides.
- The handlebar height should be at the crease of your wrist when your arms are relaxed at your sides (Figure 1).
- Loosen the knobs on the outside of the handlebars (Figure 2). For some models this may be sufficient to allow you to raise and lower the handlebars. If so, move the handlebars to the desired height. Tighten the knobs.
- If the walker has bolts which go through the handlebars, remove them and then move the handlebars to the desired height. Re-install the bolts and screw the knobs to the bolt. The knobs should be on the outside of the handlebars. Some frames have a hexagonal hole for the bolt head to fit into. Ensure the bolt head is properly aligned with hole before tightening fully.
- The seat height is not adjustable. If the seat is too high or too low, a different size of walker may be more appropriate. You should be able to sit on the seat with the balls of your feet touching the ground.

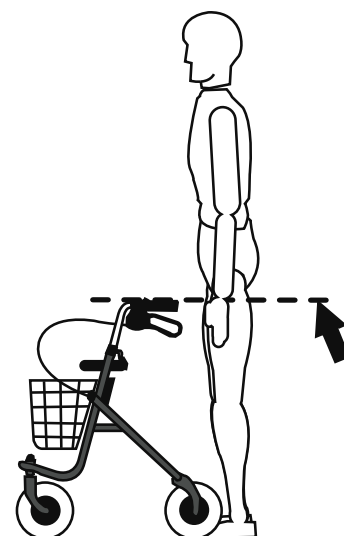


Figure 1:
Correct sizing

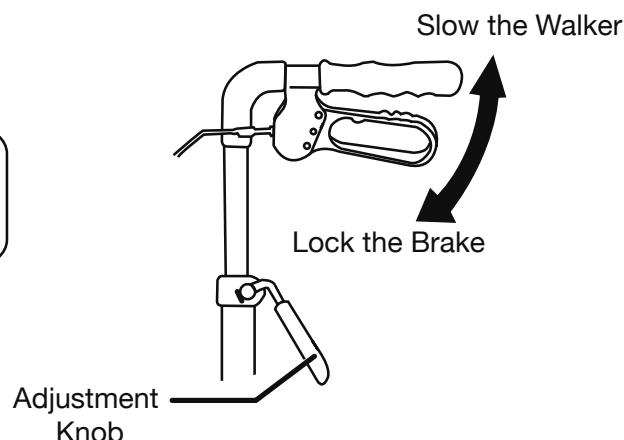
How Do I Use The Four Wheeled Walker?

- Lean on the walker, allowing it to roll forward with control as you step forward.
- To slow the walker down, squeeze or pull up on the handbrake (Figure 2).
- Before using the seat, activate the parking brake by pushing down on the handbrake (Figure 2). To release the brake, carefully squeeze the brake handles again, being careful not to pinch your fingers.



WARNING Do not use the walker on stairs or escalators. Pay special attention on ramps or slopes.

Figure 2:
Handbrake Positions and
Adjustment Knob



Please ensure that equipment returned to the Red Cross is clean and in good condition.

Sitting on the Walker

- To sit on the walker, turn around and back up until you feel the seat touch the back of your legs



WARNING Always lock the brakes of the walker before sitting or standing up.

- Reach back and place your arms on the handles of the walker.
- Sit down slowly and carefully.



WARNING The walker is not intended to be used as a wheelchair. Do not move the walker when sitting in it.

Loading the Basket

- If the walker has a basket, be sure it is securely hooked on to the cross rail before putting anything in it.



WARNING Do not overload the basket. An oxygen tank or other awkward load should be fastened down.

Folding and Unfolding the Walker

- If the walker has a tray, it should be positioned onto the seat so that the plastic plugs fit into the holes in the seat.
- To fold the walker, lift up on the handle attached to the seat. The walker may have a tab under the seat which locks the walker in the open position. Lift up on the tab to release the seat so it will fold.



WARNING Ensure all body parts are clear of the frame before folding the walker.

- To unfold the walker, push down on the seat to open it fully.



WARNING Some walkers come with a flexible back strap. Do not push down or lean on this strap with your hand. Do not use the back strap to lift and carry the walker.

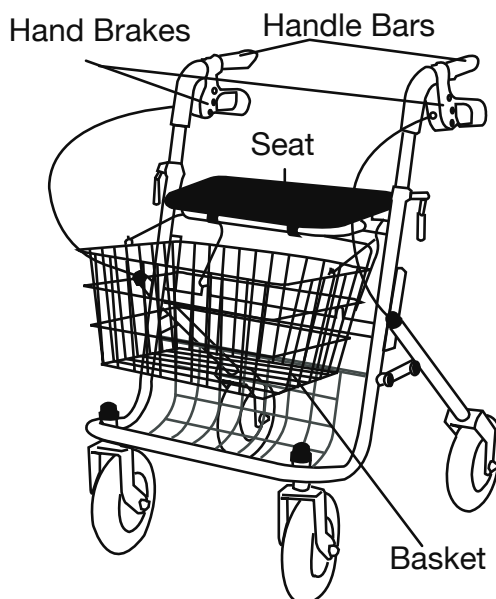


Figure 3:
Four Wheeled Walker

How Do I Care for the Four Wheeled Walker?

- Use a non-abrasive detergent or cleaner with warm water.
- Periodically check knobs and screws to ensure they are tight.
- Contact the Red Cross immediately if any repairs are needed.



Please ensure that equipment returned to the Red Cross is clean and in good condition.

Walking Aids - Walkers

Walkers are the last option for people who don't require or want to use a wheelchair and can't use canes or crutches safely. Basically the walker is a frame which the user takes with them and uses for support when their strength, stamina and/or balance while walking has been impaired by some condition or injury.

A basic walker is just a metal frame which is in a "U" shape where the two arms of the "U" are at the sides of the user and the base of the "U" is across the front of the user. The handles for the user to grip are on the arms of the "U".



The using of a conventional walker involves simply stepping into the walker, moving the walker forward, stepping into the walker, moving it forward etc. Disadvantages of this procedure are maintaining balance while moving the walker, some users may not have the strength to lift the walker, changing direction while walking requires the user to turn the walker while lifting and moving it forward.

Wheels can be added to a conventional walker to ease the movement of the walker but this modification isn't as functional as using a walker which is designed to have wheels.

Some manufacturers have designed conventional walkers which fold which is helpful for storage and transportation but is not advantageous to the user.

Wheeled walkers are the norm today and come in two basic configurations. The first is considered an indoor walker which works best indoors or on hard flat surfaces. The second is considered an outdoor walker which will work fine indoors and works okay over rougher terrains found outdoors.

Indoor wheeled walkers normally normally feature four wheels (the front two swivelling), a seat which doubles as a tray for carrying drinks and meals etc., a basket to carry purses and shopping etc. and padded bar or strap which serves as a bit of a backrest while sitting. This class of walker will also fold for storage and transportation.

Having wheels on a walker eliminates the need to lift the walker when moving and better facilitate a more normal walking gait than the stop and go gait of a conventional walker.

Having a seat is a great feature for those who suffer from a lack of stamina when walking because they always have a place to sit and rest when tired. Because using a walker requires the use of both hands it's very difficult to carry things. Having a seat which doubles as a tray will solve the problem of carrying things while using the walker.

A padded bar or strap that can be used as a backrest is also a good feature for people who sit on the walker's seat. It gives the user some back support when sitting plus it will prevent the user from sitting too far back onto the walker and causing it to be unstable or tip over.

The pictured model of indoor wheeled walker has the basket mounted under the seat. Some models of indoor walker feature the walker basket mounted out in front of the frame. When seated on a walker with the basket out in front, the user is facing away from the basket making it unsafe to keep anything of value in the basket.



Outdoor walkers offer the same features as the indoor walkers with the added feature of brakes similar to the brakes one would find on a bicycle. Outdoor walkers are constructed of heavier metal and have larger wheels than indoor walkers which is why they are better suited to outdoor use than the indoor walkers.

Many people feel more secure because of the heavier weight of the outdoor walker and the larger wheels even when used indoors.

The larger wheels of an outdoor walker will roll over little obstacles such as sidewalk cracks and softer surfaces such as gravel driveways and lawns better than indoor walkers.

The brakes of an outdoor walker can be used to slow the walker down while walking on inclines such as ramps and hills so the walker can't get away from the user. The brakes can also be locked on for safety while sitting and to prevent the walker from rolling away if left parked on an incline.



“No one should ever sit on a walker without having the brakes locked on. I've seen people in malls sitting on their walkers and propelling themselves backward by pushing with their feet. This is a very dangerous use of their walker as they aren't designed to be moved while the user is sitting on the seat and is prone to tipping over forward if an obstacle is hit while moving” Author Unknown