

Independent Living Assistance

Wheelchair safety and etiquette



If you don't already know someone who uses a wheelchair, chances are that at some stage during your life, you will meet, and possibly have to assist someone who does. What should or shouldn't you do when meeting someone in a wheelchair? What are the safe ways to manoeuvre a wheelchair in different situations?

When meeting someone in a wheelchair:

- Offer to shake the person's hand even if they appear to have limited use of their arms. The action keeps social norms and acknowledges them as a person, not as a disability.
- Always ask the person whether they would like assistance before helping them. Never assume that a person in a wheelchair needs your assistance.
- Never lean or hang on to a person's wheelchair. It is a part of their personal space.
- Always speak directly to the person in the wheelchair rather than speaking only to others nearby. It is not appropriate to be talked about rather than to, especially if it is about themselves.
- Remember that people in wheelchairs may have a purely physical rather than intellectual disability, even if their speech or appearance is affected.
- If you are having a lengthy conversation with someone in a wheelchair, consider sitting so you are not standing over them.
- If a person in a wheelchair requests direction, include information about the distance and possible physical obstacles, if you are aware of them. These all affect the person's ability to travel and to access certain sites.
- Do not discourage children from asking questions about a wheelchair. Open communication assists in overcoming any fear or misleading attitudes towards people with disability.

- If a person in a wheelchair has to transfer to a chair, toilet, car or bed, ensure the wheelchair is close to them at all times.
- Be aware of the capacities and capabilities of the person in the wheelchair and don't be afraid to ask questions to obtain information regarding the help they may need.

Going up a step / multiple steps backward

- Reverse the wheelchair so the back is nearest the steps
- Tip the chair back and balance the weight on the back wheels
- Pull steadily upwards
- Move back until there is sufficient room to put down all wheels

Going up a step forward

- Tip the chair back so the front wheels clear the step
- Place the front wheels on top of the step
- Push steadily and firmly until the large wheels ride up
- Ensure the wheelchair is safely on the flat surface.

Going down steps

This should be performed with the wheelchair going backwards to prevent the person in the wheelchair from being tipped forwards.

- Reverse the wheelchair to the edge of the step. Keep your arms close to your body
- Lower the rear wheels down the step
- Lower front wheels.

Pushing a wheelchair downhill

- When the gradient is very steep, it is advisable to go down backwards to prevent

the person in the wheelchair from being tipped forwards.

Folding a wheelchair

- Remove any cushions or backrests
- Lift the footplates
- Stand to one side of the wheelchair and lift the seat upholstery from the front and back.
- Keep your back straight and bend from the knees. Remember to follow manual handling techniques.

Unfolding a wheelchair

- Lean the wheelchair to one side against your body
- Hold onto the push handle nearest to you.
- Place your hands flat on the inner seat frame furthest away from you.
- Push down firmly, keeping fingers clear of the edge of the seat frame.
- Remember to follow manual handling techniques

Putting a wheelchair into a car boot

- Place a blanket or mat over the tailgate to protect the car
- Remove any cushions or backrests
- Footplates and armrests can be removed to lighten the weight of the wheelchair. Quick-release wheels can also be removed, but sometimes having them loose can result in damage to the wheel making it difficult to refit.
- Fold the wheelchair and engage the brakes with the chair facing the boot
- Bend your knees, maintain natural curves of your spine and lean the wheelchair frame towards you
- Grasp the X bar, under the seat of the wheelchair frame and roll the chair up onto your thighs

- Step forward and place chair on the edge of the boot
- Straighten your legs to lift the chair up and into the boot
- Remember to use your leg muscles, not your back
- There is equipment available which can assist you with this task

Further information and support

Through **My Aged Care** it is possible for older people to access Australian Government-subsidised services including an occupational therapist assessment and advice, and equipment. For further information and to check eligibility, call 1800 000 422 or visit www.myagedcare.gov.au/.

People under the age of 65 with a permanent disability who are **National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS)** participants and may be eligible for therapy and training supports by an occupational therapist. If they have Assistive Technology or Consumables funding approval they may be eligible for equipment that is deemed necessary.

Catalyst Foundation (including Seniors Information Service) can help you to access useful resources and to locate service providers and equipment suppliers. Tel. (08) 8168 8776 or email information@catalystfoundation.com.au.

The information contained here is general in nature and is not intended as health advice.

Catalyst Foundation is supported by the Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care. Visit the website www.sa.health.gov.au for more information. Although funding for this publication has been provided by the Australian Government, the material contained herein does not necessarily represent the views or policies of the Australian Government.

Reviewed March 2024