Physical Disabilities (Older Adults): Walking Aids

Search date
13/04/2022

Author
Susan Marie Bellman MClinSc, MNutrDiet, BPharm, GradCertDiabEdM

Publication date
13/07/2022

Question
What is the best available evidence regarding the effectiveness of walking aids to assist older adults with physical disabilities?

Clinical Bottom Line
Many older adults with mobility limitations use walking aids to assist with their physical function.1 Some reports suggest that walking aids contribute toward increasing feelings of control, freedom, worthiness and dignity. Other evidence suggests that walking aids may have a destabilizing effect, interfere with movement when recovering one's balance; and generate major metabolic and physiological issues, vulnerability and dependency when moving.1

- A systematic review investigated the ability of walking aids to enable activity and participation of older adults with physical disabilities. Walking aids included canes, crutches, walkers and rollators. A walker was described as a walking aid with no wheels or with two or four small wheels. A rollator was described as a four-wheeled walking aid, with a seat, back support, brakes, handles and a basket. (In clinical practice it must be noted that the terms walker and rollator are occasionally used interchangeably). Evidentiary findings showed that rollators, canes (especially single canes) and crutches improved walking distance and speed, and allowed better movement within the community. Canes and crutches allowed better stair climbing and easier use of public transport, compared to walkers, while rollators having the seat, allowed people the opportunity to rest whenever they required. Rollators were also shown to enable more frequent walking excursions, shopping or socializing, and made completion of household tasks easier (eg, carrying shopping bags and cooking). Other positive aspects of walking aids (generally) included that they helped to develop a feeling of safety and independence on a daily basis. Negative issues that emerged with walking aids included the inability to access public transportation, difficulty maneuvering in crowded public places, at their own home or family members’ homes, poor aesthetics and stigma associated with walking aids resulting in lack of desire to go out in public and feelings of vulnerability and inferiority.1 (Level 2)

Characteristics Of The Evidence
This evidence summary is based on a structured search of the literature and selected evidence-based health care databases. The evidence in this summary comes from:

- A systematic review that included 13 studies (one pre-test post-test study, two case-controlled studies and four case series, five qualitative studies and one mixed methods study). For 11 of the 13 studies, study participants were aged ≥ 65 years of age.1
Best Practice Recommendations

1. Walking aids may effectively improve the activity and participation of some older adults with physical disabilities. However, healthcare professionals should support and encourage older adults to accept and integrate their walking aid into their daily activities, and mitigate potential and perceived barriers to them using their walking aid. (Grade B)

References


Archived Publications

1. JBI-ES-2395-4 (Published at 13 July 2022)
2. JBI-ES-2395-3 (Published at 20 June 2022)
3. JBI-ES-2395-2 (Published at 24 May 2022)
4. JBI-ES-2395-1 (Published at 8 April 2021)