



## Active Neuro Walking Aid Resource November 2021



**ACTIVE NEURO**

**-MOVE BETTER, FEEL BETTER, BE BETTER-**



**Rialtas na hÉireann**  
Government of Ireland



**SPECIALIST ONLINE EXERCISE PROGRAMMES**

This project has received funding from the Government of Ireland's Sláintecare Integration Fund 2019 under Grant Agreement Number 135.

This guide is for participants of MS Ireland physiotherapy programmes. The aim is to provide you with the information you need to safely choose and use external support for your walking. Always consult your physiotherapist about the best options for you.

This leaflet is broken up into 5 sections. Please read all the sections in this document and complete the associated worksheets. After you have done that, you can jump to the section you want to revise by clicking on the headings below.

## [Contents](#)

Section 1 – Walking aid options available .....	3
Section 2 – Choosing the right aid.....	7
Section 3 – Safety checklist.....	9
Section 4 – Using your stick, crutch or walking poles .....	10
Section 5 – Using your rollator.....	11

Having read this leaflet, you will:

- Know the options available to you to increase your stability and safety when walking
- Know how to choose the right device for the activity you are planning
- Complete the safety checklist for any mobility aids that you already have
- Know which hand to have a stick in, and which pattern to use with your stick or crutch
- Know how to use a rollator safely

## Section 1 – Walking aid options available

There are many solutions to managing strength and balance symptoms of your neurological conditions and reduce your risk of falling. These range from devices to help your foot lift, to walking sticks, poles and other stability solutions.

Accepting the need for more support can be difficult – people talk about “not wanting to give in” or worry that taking more support will mean they might get worse. In fact, the opposite is true, with the increased support you will likely walk more efficiently and safely and therefore be able to increase your walking time and speed.

*“I have never met someone who is disappointed with their choice to start using a walking aid or use one with more support that they currently use. Usually, the increased support means the person with a neurological condition can exercise more, and exercise more confidently” Dr Susan Coote, MS Specialist  
Physiotherapist*

Using the correct device means that your energy usage will be lower, your walking pattern will be better, and most importantly your confidence in walking will improve. Choosing not to do something because you are afraid of falling is a key sign that you need more support.

Research suggests that the more types of walking aid you use, the more likely you are to fall. This is probably a result of not enough practice with any one of the aids or people aren't taught how to use them safely. Choosing the one correct aid for the activity you are doing, the level of balance challenge, and your fatigue levels is important and is covered in [Section 2](#).

Here is a selection of what Walking Aids are available; it is best to consult with your physiotherapist first as they are not suitable for everyone. These are not recommendations for you, these are examples of what is possible so that you can start a conversation with your physiotherapist.

## **To help drop foot;**

### **Dictus Splint or Rebound or Foot up**



These have a band around your lower calf and rubber bands or a strap from that to your shoelaces. They do the job of your weak ankle muscles and hold your toes up, so you don't trip.

### **Ankle Foot Orthosis (AFO)**

These are worn over your sock and inside your shoe. A "leaf spring" is best if you don't have calf stiffness as it allows ankle movement enabling a long stride.

If you have calf stiffness (sometimes called high tone) and your calf muscles tend to contract continuously, you may need a "rigid AFO". You can buy these "off the shelf" and sometimes a referral to an orthotist is

needed to get a custom made one. Referral to Primary Care Physiotherapy would be needed to apply for funding for an AFO.



It is important that they are fitted correctly, as they can rub on your skin and cause a sore. This is particularly of concern if you have numbness or reduced sensation in your foot or leg.

When you start wearing an AFO you should wear it for a short time only (10 minutes) and check your skin for redness afterwards. Any redness should disappear within 30 minutes; if it doesn't you need to stop wearing it and talk to the provider. If there is no redness after 30 minutes you can gradually increase the wear time checking your skin when you take it off.

## **To give stability when walking**

It is important that any walking aid is the correct height and that you are taught how to use it. Generally, the aid should be in the hand on the *opposite*

*side to your weaker leg.* It will take practice to use any aid. Please see the later sections in this booklet on safety checks and correct use.



Walking poles are a very popular choice of walking aid by people of all ages and a variety of fitness levels. They can be thought of as less medical and sportier. They give good stability but can require practice to get the coordination right. There is a risk that they distract you from what your feet

are doing. You should have one with a stopper and not a spike at the end.

This [short video](#) explains how to use your walking poles. Your local [Sports Partnership](#) may also run Nordic poles classes.

Crutches are sometimes better received than walking sticks as they are associated with sporty people and injuries. You can get coloured or non-medical ones in addition to those metal ones typically provided by the health service. The crutch is *held in the hand opposite the weak leg*. The opposite hand and leg move together. Always take your hand out of the arm band before you sit down.

Walking sticks can be foldable so you can carry them in your bag to use if you get tired. Caution is required with folding sticks to make sure they are properly extended before use. Standard sticks come in a variety of colours with a variety of handles in addition to the standard wooden or metal sticks the health service provides. As with crutches and poles, *they are held in the hand opposite the weaker leg*.

Rollator or Walker; These aids should be used when support of a walking aid in one hand – such as a crutch or a stick – is not enough. The advantage of these is that most have a seat and a basket or bag for carrying objects. The seat is

useful if you have a lot of fatigue as you can rest any time you need. Your falls risk is increased if you are carrying something, therefore the basket or bag is useful if you have difficulty concentrating on two things at once.

They come in three and four wheeled options. The 4 wheeled ones are more stable and usually have a seat, but sometimes are heavier and harder to fold and lift into a car. They range from basic to sporty lightweight options for all ages.



All have brakes and it is essential that the brakes are put on whenever you stop. The risk with a rollator is that it rolls away from you – you can adjust the brakes (in the same way as you adjust bicycle brakes) so that they are slightly tight. This will provide some resistance and slow the rollator down.

A standard frame with wheels and stoppers can often be safer than a 4 wheeled walker as it is less inclined to run away from you.



## Section 2 – Choosing the right aid

The national MS Society have produced an excellent resource on choosing the right walking aid. You can read it by clicking [here](#)

Here are some practical steps you can take to decide which walking aid is right for your chosen activity

**Step 1** – assess your fatigue levels when starting the activity, and how fatiguing that activity will be – as a rule of thumb, the higher your fatigue, the more support you will need.

**Step 2** – assess how challenging the activity is for your balance – are there uneven surfaces involved? Are there steps or curbs? Is there a hill or slope? Are there obstacles on your route? The more challenging it is the more support you will need

Use the checklist below to work out which aid you will use. The higher your score on the checklist, the higher level of support you would need.

<b>Fatigue Rating</b>	Yes	No
This is not the first walking activity I will do today	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I am tired starting this activity	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Today is a bad day for fatigue	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The activity requires a lot of physical or mental energy	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The activity makes me feel more stressed	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have more fatigue at the time of day I am doing the activity	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Balance Rating</b>	Yes	No
The surface is uneven	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Walking on that surface needs more energy or concentration	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
There are steps, curbs or stairs	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The surface is slippery	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The surface is compliant (sand, gravel, grass)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I need to turn my head and/or my body to complete the activity	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The lighting is poor where the activity will take place	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Total number of “Yes” answers \_\_\_\_\_

The more yes answers, the more external support you will need - this illustration shows your options, from low support to high support. If you are unsure, always take more support to be sure you are safe.





## Section 3 – Safety checklist

Is your mobility aid safe? Test your aid according to the following checklist. Check off the items that apply to your aid.

### Stick or crutch

Hand grip is not worn	<input type="checkbox"/>
Leg tips/ferrules are not worn (they should have treads like a car tyre)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Leg tips do not have pebbles in them	<input type="checkbox"/>
Folds easily and release button depresses easily (if applicable)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Unfolds easily and release button catches (if applicable)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Easily adjustable and is set at the appropriate height	<input type="checkbox"/>
The overall condition of the material (e.g. aluminium, wood) is good	<input type="checkbox"/>
The aid can hold my weight	<input type="checkbox"/>
Clean of mud, sand etc.	<input type="checkbox"/>

Plan to improve safety of stick or crutch:

---



---

### Walker/Rollator

Hand grips are not worn	<input type="checkbox"/>
Brakes hold the rollator steady	<input type="checkbox"/>
Leg tips are not worn (Walker)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Leg tips do not have pebbles in them (Walker)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Folds easily and release button depresses easily (if applicable)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Unfolds easily and release button catches (if applicable)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Wheels are not worn and rotate easily (if applicable)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Walker (height or seat) is easily adjustable	<input type="checkbox"/>
The walker or rollator handles are set at the appropriate height	<input type="checkbox"/>
The overall condition of the material (e.g. aluminium, wood) is good	<input type="checkbox"/>
The aid can hold my weight	<input type="checkbox"/>
Walker is clean of sand, mud etc.	<input type="checkbox"/>

Plan to improve safety of walker or rollator:

---



---

## Section 4 – Using your stick, crutch or walking poles

The handle should be set at the height of your wrist when your elbow is slightly bent (arm relaxed by your side).

### **One stick or crutch**

Hold walking stick or crutch in **opposite** hand to your weaker side.

The stick moves forward at the same time as the weaker leg. Then the stronger leg follows. [This video demonstrates](#) getting the right height and the pattern to use your stick.

### **Two sticks, two crutches or walking poles**

You have 2 options for the walking pattern:

Right crutch and left leg go together, then left crutch and right leg (as if you were marching)

OR

Both crutches go with your bad leg, then the good leg follows.

### **When climbing up stairs:**

Hold the banister for support if needed.

Step up with your *stronger leg first*.

Then step up to *the same step* with your walking stick and weaker leg.

### **When climbing down stairs:**

Hold the banister for support if needed.

First, put your walking stick down onto the step below.

Next, step down with your *weaker leg*.

Then step down to *the same step* with your stronger leg.

To remember which leg goes first this rhyme can be useful

**“Good goes up to heaven, bad goes down to hell”**

i.e. stronger leg goes first going up, weaker leg goes first going down.

[Here is a video](#) showing how to go up and down stairs safely.

If you want more information, [this guide](#) gives you more information about using your walking stick correctly

## Section 5 – Using your rollator

The most important part of your rollator are the brakes! Rollators can run away from you unless you have your brakes slightly engaged as you are walking. Always put your brakes on when you stop.

Bring your rollator with you all the way to where you are going – don't leave it behind for the last few steps and turn – reverse into your chair or toilet with it in front of you.

If you are stopping to sit on your rollator seat for a rest, make sure the brakes are on before you start turning to sit down.

For more information on how to use your rollator safely [click here](#)

[This video shows](#) how to get the right height for the handles and how to use your rollator safely.