



## What to do when you meet a wheelchair user

You can be sure that no one chooses to be a wheelchair user. People use wheelchairs for many different reasons. When you first meet a wheelchair user, it is impossible to know the reason they use a wheelchair and to know what they can and can't do. Maybe you feel it is difficult to know what to say and what to do. You don't want to say the wrong thing, but at the same time you want to be helpful and understanding. These suggestions may help you.

### 1. Don't think you know what someone can or can't do.



You don't know what this person can or can't do. Just because someone uses a wheelchair it does not mean that they can't move at all, and maybe they can even walk a little. Some people only use a wheelchair because they cannot stand up for long. So don't be surprised if you see someone who uses a wheelchair moving their legs or standing up. It would not be kind to ask them if they really need to use a wheelchair.

### 2. Say hello in the same way you say hello to other people.

Offer to shake hands, even if you are not sure if this is easy for the wheelchair user.

### 3. Speak to the person who uses the wheelchair.

If the wheelchair user is with a friend, don't talk to the friend about the wheelchair user. If you want to help, don't ask the friend "Does *he* need help?" This makes the wheelchair user feel stupid. Ask the wheelchair user "Do *you* need help?" If you are going to have a long conversation, bend down or go somewhere where you can sit down so your faces are at the same height. If you can't sit down somewhere, move back a little so the wheelchair user doesn't have to lift his head and neck to look at you.



**4. It is OK to say things like "let's go for a walk".**

A wheelchair user knows that when you say "let's go for a walk" you don't expect him to walk. It is best to talk naturally, because if you try and change the words you normally use it shows that you are thinking about the things the wheelchair user can't do.

**5. Think before you ask questions and think before you make comments.**

You may want to know the reason the person uses a wheelchair, but it is better not to ask. Someone who uses a wheelchair will tell you if they want to. People who use wheelchairs don't want to talk all the time about the difficulties they face and they don't want to hear stories about other wheelchair users. So when you meet a wheelchair user, just talk about the same things you talk about with other people.

**6. Ask before you touch the wheelchair user or the wheelchair.**



Wheelchair users are at children's height, and people often touch their shoulders or heads in the same way that they touch children. Other people want to show they are friends by banging their back or doing a high five, but these things are not a good idea. If you touch an adult in the same way as you touch a child it makes them feel uncomfortable. Also you must be careful not to hurt a wheelchair user by mistake, as they may have medical problems you don't know about. A wheelchair user considers his wheelchair as part of himself, so don't touch it without asking first.

**7. Think before you offer to help.**

It can be difficult to know when to offer to help. Wheelchair users are proud to be able to do things by themselves. If you see a situation where you think you could help, ask first, and listen to the answer. If the wheelchair user says he doesn't need help, then don't help. Don't walk behind the wheelchair for two reasons. Firstly, because this makes the wheelchair user feel you are waiting for the moment when they can't do something, and secondly because it is difficult to have a conversation with someone behind you. Wheelchair users can move very fast, so you may need to ask them to go more slowly so you can walk side by side. Never move someone's wheelchair without asking them first, even if they are not using it at the time.

**8. Respect people who use wheelchairs at all times.**

Don't make life difficult for people who use wheelchairs. Don't park in places for people with disabilities and don't park on ramps, not even for 5 minutes. Try and make it a habit to think about wheelchair users. Then you will feel more comfortable when you meet a wheelchair user for the first time.

