

WHEELCHAIR SAFETY & ETIQUETTE

If you don't already know someone who is in a wheelchair, chances are that at some stage during your life, you will at least meet and possibly have to assist someone who is.

But what should or shouldn't you do when meeting someone in a wheelchair? And what are the safe ways to manoeuvre a wheel chair in different situations?

To begin with, the following points are suggestions of appropriate behaviour when meeting someone in a wheelchair:

- Always ask the person whether they would like assistance *before* you help them. Never simply assume that a wheelchair user needs your assistance as he or she may find this patronising.
- Don't ever lean or hang on a person's wheelchair as it is a part of his or her personal space.
- Always speak directly to someone in a wheelchair rather than speaking only to others nearby. Not speaking directly to the wheelchair user will appear as though you are dismissing their existence.
- Remember that many wheelchair users 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 or kneeling down to put yourself on the same level.
- There is rarely any need to express sympathy towards a wheelchair user. Sympathetic stares, comments or touches are usually meant well but may be viewed by the wheelchair user as demeaning. Never assume that using a wheelchair is in itself a tragedy.
- It is also not usually necessary to try and avoid the topic of the person's disability or wheelchair use. Wheelchair users often appreciate the opportunity to explain the nature of their disability or illness rather than have assumptions made about them.
- If a wheelchair user should request directions, include information about the distance, weather conditions and possible physical obstacles. 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 disabilities.
- If someone in a wheelchair has to transfer onto a chair, toilet, car or bed, do not move the wheelchair out of his or her reach.
- Be aware of a wheelchair user's limits and capabilities and don't be afraid to ask questions to find out about this if necessary.

When it comes to manoeuvring a wheelchair, the following points provide a few tips and safety aspects to consider in various situations:

Going up a step backwards:

- 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
- you can use this method to go up multiple steps

Going up a step forwards:

- tip the chair back so the front wheels clear the step
- put the front wheels on top of the step
- push steadily and firmly until the large wheels ride up
- ensure the chair is safely on the flat surface

Going down steps:

* this should generally be performed with the wheelchair going backwards to prevent the user from being tipped forwards.

- reverse the wheelchair to the edge of the step
- 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 wheelchair user from tipping out.

Folding a wheelchair:

- remove any cushions or backrests
- lift the footplates
- stand to one side of the chair and lift the seat upholstery from the front and back

Unfolding a wheelchair:

- lean the wheelchair to one side against your body
- hold onto the push handle nearest to you
- place your other hand flat on the seat rail which is furthest from you
- push down firmly keeping fingers clear of the edge of the seat frame

Putting a wheelchair into a car:

- remove any cushions or backrests
- remove footplates, armrests and wheels (if wheels are quick-release)
- fold the chair and engage the brakes
- bend your knees, keep the back straight and lean the wheelchair frame towards you
- grasp both sides of the wheelchair frame and roll the chair up onto your thighs
- straighten your legs to lift the chair up and into the boot
- remember to use your leg muscles - not your back!