



## Wheelchair Etiquette

The key concept when interacting with someone using a wheelchair is to focus on the person, not on his or her disability.

### Check your assumptions

Don't assume that using a wheelchair is a tragedy. When they are well fitted and well chosen, wheelchairs are actually a means of freedom that allows the user to move about independently and fully engage in life. With that in mind, don't classify or think of people who use wheelchairs as "sick". Wheelchairs are used to help people adapt to or compensate for the mobility impairments that result from many non-contagious impairments such as: spinal cord injury, stroke, amputation, muscular dystrophy, cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis, post polio, heart disease, etc.

### Approaching a wheelchair user

Approach someone using a wheelchair as you do everyone else - greet them with a smile, introduce yourself and shake their hand. Understand that the wheelchair is an extension of their body and it should not be touched unless they request you to do so. The same applies if they have a guide dog or other service animal. These are working animals and should not be petted.

### Talking to a wheelchair user

Always speak directly to the wheelchair user, rather than a caregiver, and if your conversation lasts more than a few minutes, sit down if possible to get yourself on the same eye-level. This will keep both of you from getting a stiff neck!

It is okay to use expressions like "running along" or "lets go for a walk" when speaking to a wheelchair user. It is likely they express the idea of moving along in exactly the same way.

Allow children to ask questions of a person who uses a wheelchair about their wheelchair. Open

communication helps overcome fearful or misleading attitudes.

### Offering assistance

People who use wheelchairs have varying capabilities, so it is important not to assume every wheelchair user needs help. Some people who use wheelchairs can walk with aid or for short distances. They use wheelchairs because they help them to conserve energy and to move about with greater efficiency.

Offer assistance only if the person needs it, or if you see them struggling to attempt a task. Always wait for the wheelchair user to accept your assistance verbally, and if they do accept, then ask what specific way they need you to help.

When giving directions, think about things like travel distance, location of kerb cuts and ramps, weather conditions and physical obstacles that may hinder their travel.

### Wheelchair do's and don'ts

- Do speak to them as an adult
- Do see the person for who they are, not just a wheelchair user
- Do offer assistance if it seems necessary and wait for a response
- Do look into their eyes when speaking to them
- Do laugh and have a good time
- Do not grab or touch the wheelchair unless asked by the user
- Do not discuss them with their caregiver as if they were not in the room
- Do not have a sad look on your face because you feel bad for them