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## Reaching and Mobility Aids for Independent Living

The freedom to move from place to place in your home and out in the community is critical to independence. If you have problems with movement, balance, or coordination, there are a number of devices that may help you get around and accomplish everyday activities. This article includes information on devices to help with reaching, lifting and walking.

### **Reaching Aids**

Pushing, pulling, grasping and turning are movements that can be easier for you with a reaching aid. These aids have been designed to cover a wide range of activities and will help people with a weak or painful grip, or a limited range of motion.

The most common reachers consist of a pair of jaws controlled by a trigger mechanism. Made of lightweight aluminum and plastic, they are available in a variety of sizes and lengths. The desk-sized model, about 24" long, is useful for retrieving objects on your desk, kitchen counter, or bedside table. A mid-range length, about 28" long, is useful for everyday activities such as picking up objects from the floor or reaching high storage areas. An extra-long model, about 32" long, is also available if you need extended reach.

Features you may find useful include a magnet for catching and holding metal objects, and a projecting lug for pulling things toward you. Folding styles and reachers with a toggle (rather than a trigger) closing action, swivel heads, or forearm extensions are also available.

Prices vary widely, depending on the size and features. Reachers are available at most medical supply stores.

### **Walking Aids**

Mobility can be complicated by many factors, such as pain and weakness in the legs or back, uncertain balance or dizziness, muscular tremors or spasms, or paralysis. There are a variety of changes that can be made to your environment that may enhance your mobility both in and outside of your home.

## **Modify Your Home**

- Install grab bars in critical locations.
- Remove small rugs and avoid shag carpeting.
- Arrange furniture so that you can walk from one solid piece to the next, using the furniture for support.

## **Clothing and Footwear**

- Choose pants and tops that do not restrict motion, and that do not trail behind you.
- Choose shoes with textured soles for better grip.
- Removable cleats can give you better footing on ice or snow.

## **Canes**

Although canes can be purchased at many drugstores, you should consult with your doctor if you are having frequent or pronounced periods of weakness, dizziness or poor coordination. Consider the following factors when selecting a cane:

- Height: the handle should be at the height of your hip joint.
- Weight: you should not have trouble lifting the cane.
- Handle: the grip should be comfortable and secure.
- Base: canes are available with single tips or with 4-legged, wide bases.

Other options available include a loop on the handle of the cane to free your hands for other activities, and a fold-down ice gripping tip which can be attached to the side of the cane.

## **Walkers**

The walker is particularly useful for individuals with balance problems, as it can provide support through both arms at a fixed distance. Walkers come in a wide

range of heights and weights, with a variety of handle styles. Ask your doctor or physical therapist for help in making a selection.

## **Grab Bars**

Grab bars make the most of your strength by giving you extra support when and where you need it, such as while getting in and out of the bathtub, a bed, or while negotiating a flight of stairs.

A grab bar looks like a towel rack, but that is where the similarity ends. A grab bar is designed to be strong enough to support your weight and more. Flanges on the ends of the bar have sturdy screws for installation, preferably into wall studs. There is room between the bar and the wall for you to get a good grip, and the diameter of the bar will feel solid in your hand.

Made of plastic or rust-resistant metal, the bar may have a rough surface to prevent your hand from slipping. Many shapes and sizes are available for different uses; most are wall-mounted, but some can be attached to the edge of your bathtub.

Consider the following when selecting a grab bar:

- Evaluate your physical abilities; choose a bar and a location which lets you use your strongest muscles most effectively.
- Make sure the bar you select is long enough to carry a movement through to its conclusion. For example, if you run out of support before you are fully standing, you could lose momentum and fall backward, or fall forward if you have too much momentum.

An occupational therapist can help you with decisions about what kind of bar to use and where to place it.

Grab bars can be purchased at plumbing and hardware stores, and at medical supply stores. If you can't find one to suit your needs, some companies will custom design a bar for you, but it will cost more. Alternatively, you may be able to combine standard bars in sequence to give you the support you need.

**For more information on the adaptations discussed here or for additional suggestions, contact:**

[Virginia Assistive Technology System \(VATS\)](#)

8004 Franklin Farms Drive

Richmond, Virginia 23229

Telephone (Local): (804) 662-9990

Toll Free: (800) 435-8490

**For aging-related information and services, contact:**

[Virginia Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services \(DARS\)](#)

1610 Forest Avenue, Suite 100

Richmond, VA 23229

Toll Free: (800) 552-3402

Adapted with permission from material created by the University of Iowa.

Article Source

DARS Office for Aging Services, Division of Community Living

Source URL

<https://www.vda.virginia.gov>

Last Reviewed

Tuesday, January 23, 2024