

Guideline F2: Using wheelchairs

Remember - carers are twice as likely as people in most other professions to injure their backs through moving and handling activities. To help minimise these risks always consider the following guidance before using wheelchairs

Self help Can the activity be avoided i.e. can the person propel the wheelchair independently or assist with some activities e.g. apply brakes.

Ergonomics The wheelchair should be suitable for the person. They can be adapted for different needs. Power packs may be used to assist propulsion but add weight and affect stability. Seek manufacturer's guidance on these. Choose routes that minimise hazardous handling e.g. dropped kerbs and steep slopes. Consider the design of a car if regularly transporting wheelchairs.

Communication Check how the person wishes to be assisted and consult their handling plan. It can be very frightening if a wheelchair is moved without the person expecting it therefore continually explain what you are going to do. When possible sit beside the person or lower to their level so that you have good eye contact when communicating with them.

Safety Many injuries, some of which have been fatal, have occurred when using wheelchairs. Ensure that you know how to operate a wheelchair before using it. Follow manufacturer's instructions on care and maintenance. Systems should be set up and records kept to ensure that this happens as recommended. Do not use a wheelchair if it needs repair. Report any unsafe wheelchair and ensure that it is repaired as soon as possible. All wheelchairs have weight limits which for many is 108kg (17st). Check that the person's weight does not exceed the limit for the chair. Take care when pushing a person in a wheelchair since the combined weight of the chair and the person in it represents a significant load. Added to this the chair may have to be pushed over a variety of different surfaces both indoors and out and sometimes up or down gradients. Never lift the wheelchair using removable parts e.g. armrests. Wear appropriate clothing and non slip footwear.

Pushing a person in a wheelchair

Preparation

1. Check that the wheelchair is suitable for the person.
2. Check that the wheelchair is well maintained and the tyres properly inflated.
3. Ensure that all parts of the wheelchair are attached and any accessories required by the person e.g. pressure relieving cushion, headrest, tray etc are to hand. These should have been provided with the wheelchair where needed.
4. Assess if you need assistance e.g. to open doors.
5. Check that the environment is safe e.g. clear and free from obstruction.
6. Ensure that the person is safe and well enough to travel in a wheelchair.

Transferring in/out of a wheelchair

1. Determine how the person wishes to be assisted where possible.
2. Apply the brakes whenever a person transfers to or from a wheelchair.
3. Put the footrests in an upright position and swing back whenever a person transfers to or from a wheelchair.
4. Remove armrests and backrests where appropriate.
5. Assist the person to or from the wheelchair using appropriate equipment where necessary e.g. hoist, transfer board.
6. Put the foot rests into the flat position and ask or assist the person to position their feet on them.
7. Check the position of the person's arms and legs once seated and remember some may have reduced or absent limb sensation.
8. Ensure the person's comfort and dignity e.g. cover legs, shoulders.
9. Fasten any lap belts or harnesses as appropriate.
10. Ensure any attachments are positioned appropriately e.g. catheter.

The journey:

1. Apply the principles taught during training for pushing, pulling and turning. This will help to protect you from injury and ensure a more comfortable journey for the person.
2. Continually explain what you are going to do. Offer reassurance if the person is concerned about any aspect of the journey e.g. steps, lifts. Do not rush,
3. Use ramps to avoid kerbs if possible. In the absence of a ramp it is usually possible to negotiate the kerb but check that manoeuvring a wheelchair in this way is within your physical capability. If in doubt check with your manager/supervisor. Never risk the safety of the person or yourself. If it is safe for you to handle a wheelchair up a kerb, approach it squarely without actually touching it. Place one foot on the tipping lever and take a secure hold on the handgrips. Carefully lever the chair back until it is balanced on its rear wheels. Push the wheelchair forwards until the front castors are on the pavement and the rear ones are touching the kerb. Using the safe movement principles push the chair up and over the kerb. **Do not lift the chair up the kerb.** Never lift the rear wheels off the ground as this will cause the front castors to twist sideways and may result in the chair slipping back off the kerb. If the chair is self propelling and the user is able to help, assistance can be given by pushing forwards on the hand rims.
4. To take a wheelchair down a kerb use a ramp if one is available. In the absence of a ramp and if it is safe for you to do, approach the kerb edge with the wheelchair facing forward. Place one foot on the tipping lever and draw the chair back to balance on its rear wheels. Hold the position of balance until there is a suitable break in the traffic, move the chair to the edge of the kerb maintaining the balance, and lower slowly down the kerb on the rear wheels. The wheelchair user can give assistance by helping to control the descent with the hand rims. Let the front castors return to the ground. Reversing down a kerb may be easier for heavier users but it is generally not recommended since it leaves you with your back to the traffic and means having to make a full turn on the road before moving forwards. It also encourages taking the full weight of the chair as it lowers to the ground.

Warning

- Do not push a person in a wheelchair without footrest in place.
- Do not attempt to lift a person in a wheelchair.
- Do not tip powered wheelchairs or those without tipper bars e.g. to go up/down kerbs.

Transferring in and out of a car

Preparation

1. Park the car on as flat a road as possible with sufficient room to allow access to/from the wheelchair.
2. Pass/position any equipment that the person may require to assist with the transfer.
3. Position the wheelchair as appropriate for the person and apply the brakes. It may be helpful to wind the car window down to provide a support.
4. Ensure that the person is safe and in a comfortable position.

Warning

1. Due to the restricted space in a car it is very difficult to provide manual assistance to someone who is transferring to/from a wheelchair into a car seat. A person may be able to move independently, if the wheelchair seat and car seat are level, by using a transfer board which allows a sliding transfer in three or four small stages. Fabric turntables are available to fit on car seats to assist with positioning.
2. Where independent transfers are not possible a hoist should be used or other means of transport should be considered.

Lifting wheelchairs in and out of a car

Preparation (more than 1 carer may be needed)

1. Assess if 1 or 2 carers are needed to lift the wheelchair and if 2 who will give the instructions.
2. Protect the paintwork on the rim of the car boot with an old rug or blanket.
3. Remove any attachments to make the wheelchair as light as possible.
4. Move the wheelchair close to the car and fold it into its compact state.
5. Stand as close to the wheelchair as possible.
6. Make sure you are balanced with your leading foot pointing in the direction in which you will be moving.
7. Using the principles taught for safer moving and handling, lower to the level of the wheelchair and grasp it close to your body.
8. Lift it to the rim of the boot and allow it to slide forwards onto the floor of the boot. If the rim is high the wheelchair can be balanced on this then lowered into the car. A blanket over the rim will protect the car body.
9. To remove the wheelchair reverse the actions.

N.B. Lifting wheelchairs in and out of cars is much less of a hazard with estate cars and some hatchbacks.