

# UNDERARM CRUTCHES

## ***Purpose***

The usual purpose of crutches is to temporarily aid the user in walking while relieving weight from one foot or leg. There are other uses for crutches but these require special training by a physician or therapist. The user must have adequate upper body and upper arm strength and must always abide by recommended procedures. When properly used, crutches can provide added stability and assistance to an individual while walking. Your physician or therapist has ordered your crutches for a specific reason. If your physician or therapist has given you specific instructions, follow them. If you have not seen a therapist or physician, we recommend that you do so.

## ***Types***

Underarm crutches are the most commonly used type of crutch. Crutches also come in a forearm model (see Forearm Crutches Patient Education Sheet). Underarm crutches come in either adjustable wood or adjustable aluminum styles and have a limited ability to adjust in size; therefore, crutches have markings that state their size limits. Make sure you read and understand all manufacturers' operating instructions.

All crutches have a maximum weight limit that they can support. It is important to understand the limits and capacities of your crutches:

Weight of user (stated by user) is \_\_\_\_\_ pounds.  
Maximum weight capacity of crutches is \_\_\_\_\_ pounds.

## ***Use***

Underarm crutches are very useful in assisting the user in walking, but they can cause nerve or muscle damage if not used or fitted properly. Underarm crutches have two adjustments: overall height and distance from hand grip to underarm support. The overall height of the crutches should be set first. The overall height should be adjusted when the user is standing straight with shoulders squared. The crutch tip should be 6 inches in front of the toes and six inches out to the side. Then the height should be adjusted to approximately 1 - 2 inches below the front of the underarm. The handgrip position should be adjusted to allow a 20 - 30 degree bend in the elbow when the user is standing up straight. Crutches should be adjusted for height when wearing the shoes you will be wearing while using the crutches. Make sure all connections are tight or have fully engaged spring buttons. Your physician or therapist may determine different underarm crutch adjustments and uses from those described in this educational sheet.

## ***Use (Continued)***

The method that medical equipment suppliers teach is called the Three-Point-Gait. At all times your total weight should be placed on the handgrips, not your armpits. While standing up straight, shift your weight to the good leg and bend your injured leg. Move both crutches forward approximately 12 inches. Now shift your weight to the handgrips and swing through the crutches until you are even with the crutches. Continue performing this routine until you are comfortable with the procedure. Once you are comfortable, you can swing through the crutches to a point in front of the crutches. This point is dependent upon your confidence and crutch-walking ability.

Never negotiate steps unless your physician or therapist has recommended that you do so. This is a potentially dangerous practice and needs specific training and monitoring. Always practice safe crutch walking. Never attempt to walk at an accelerated pace, this can cause you to slip and fall.

## ***Safety***

The safe use of your crutches requires it to be used as instructed, which includes the following safety precautions:

- Check the security of the handgrips.
- Ensure that underarm pads are present and in good condition.
- Ensure that all snap buttons protrude through the adjusting holes.
- Ensure that the locking collars or wing nuts are tight.
- Do not go up or down steps without approval from your physician or therapist.

If the crutches are to be used in environments that are above 100° F (32° C) or have high humidity or conditions that will cause the crutches to get wet, the operator must ensure that the handgrips are secure; these types of environments may cause the handgrips to twist. Always use caution when using crutches on any wet or icy surface.

In order to ensure care and provide operator safety, make sure you follow these safety guidelines:

- Use nightlights to increase vision around areas of use.
- Wipe up any water or slippery floor spills.
- Remove tripping hazards (loose floorboards, uneven floors, throw rugs, extension cords, clutter, etc.)
- Install grab bars, use bath mats with suction cups, and use elevated toilet seats to prevent falls.
- Do not use crutches when taking any medications that may cause dizziness, drowsiness, and/or unsteadiness.

## ***Maintenance***

The handgrip is very important and you should inspect it regularly. Worn or damaged handgrips or crutch tips must be replaced immediately. The handgrip should also be checked for movement or slippage on a regular basis and replaced if damaged. Ensure that the snap button releases and engages properly, and ensure that any locking collars fully lock the crutches from moving.

Your crutches, if maintained properly, can last for many years. The rubber tips are there to provide traction on walking surfaces. These tips must always be in good working condition. The handgrips are there to provide better gripping of the crutch and to provide cushioning. These should also be changed immediately when they are cracked or become uncomfortable to grasp. The under-arm pads are there to provide comfort and to help prevent any nerve damage. Replace them when they become split or uncomfortable.