

ARGnote

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Creating a Walking Stick Guide for Older People

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Overview

Older people using walking sticks are a common sight on any street. Walking sticks are used to aid balance, take weight and to continue to allow their users to walk. However a badly fitted stick can cause injury and reduce levels of walking. There is very little information available to help people learn about stick height, handle and type to get the right walking stick to meet their needs. This project aimed to create a user guide on walking sticks.

Key Findings

- Older people are not given advice on what type of walking stick they should use.
- Using the wrong height stick can cause injury.
- Where a walking stick is not fitted, they are typically too high for the user.

Aims & Objectives

This ARGnote outlines the process of creating a guide for older people on the types and fit of walking sticks. It details the process behind creating a guide that is informative, easy-to-digest and is able to be disseminated to older people across the UK. The results of the interviews and focus group are explored in a separate ARGnote.

Background

The idea for this project came from working on a longitudinal study with older people whose mobility was beginning to decline. As the months went by, more of the participants in the study began to use walking sticks. When questioned about their sticks it was noticed that none of the participants had sought advice on what type of

stick they should use and an examination of how they held their stick showed a wide variation of stick height. It was concluded that if a guide had been available these participants would have less problems with their walking sticks and be able to use them more effectively.

Method

The first step was to research what content needed to go into the guide. A literature search on walking sticks was carried out. To complement this search and to understand the challenges within a real-world setting a series of interviews with a variety of stakeholders were conducted: a physiotherapist, an accessibility researcher, an occupational therapist, and an assistive technology researcher.

The second step in creating the guide was to talk to older people to find out what they knew, what they didn't know, and what they wanted to know about walking sticks. Older people who used a walking stick were interviewed about their experiences. How did they obtain their stick? Why was their specific style of stick chosen? When do they use their stick? When do they not use their stick? Does their stick ever need maintenance?

A focus group with a group of older people who didn't use walking sticks was held. Participants were asked to imagine they needed a walking stick and were asked about the process in which they would choose one. What would they want to know about a stick before they bought one? Did they know where to purchase one? Did they know what type of stick should be used for what type of mobility impairment? What height should a walking stick be? Participants were then asked about what information in a guide should be a

priority and what the format should be in order to make the guide easily digestible.

The third step was to create the guide based upon the information from the first two steps. Once the content was written the guide was given to a designer who structured it into an easy-to-read format following the recommendations from the user interviews and focus group.

The final step was to show the draft guide to the focus group and interview participants as well as to the previously interviewed stakeholders for feedback. The guide was refined in light of the feedback.

Results

The literature search and the interviews with the stakeholders showed that walking sticks improve balance and give their user more confidence to walk. A walking stick should reach the height of the users wrist¹, so as not to raise the height of their shoulder when using it. However, most people do not have their walking stick fitted for their individual height and as a result use a walking stick that is too high². A walking stick that is too high can result in injuries and make it more difficult for the user to walk³. As a consequence some people who choose to use a walking stick to help them walk end up walking less than they used to.

Individual interviews were carried out with six older people who used walking sticks. In addition, a focus group with four older adults who had never used walking sticks was held. The walking stick users were asked about how/why they obtained their walking stick, how frequently they used their stick, and any challenges they faced when using the stick. The focus group participants were asked what they would want to know about walking sticks if they chose to buy one. All the participants were shown a number of different types of walking sticks; a non-adjustable traditional curved handle stick, a folding ergonomic grip stick, a tetrapod stick and a swan neck stick and asked if they knew what the benefits of each type of stick were. The results of the interviews are detailed in the next ARGnote in this series.

The Guide

The content of the guide was originally illustrated with photographs of an older adult holding a walking stick, demonstrating the correct height. Pictures of different types of walking sticks were also included. However, when the designer was

given the content they explored the option of using drawn illustrations which ultimately created a clearer guide. The drawn illustrations required less written content to explain them and given the participants felt a clear layout was critical to a guides success the drawn illustrations were used.

The created guide was a four page A4 sized pamphlet with minimal words accompanied by explanatory graphics. It is available to download (for free) at:

www.cege.ucl.ac.uk/tarsan/Pages/publications.aspx

As the majority of older people are not online the guide was printed out and disseminated at accessibility and disability events across the UK as well as through several charity groups.

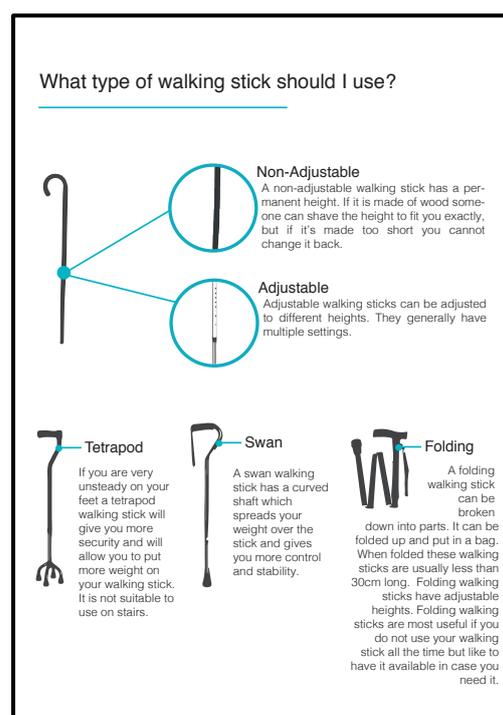


Figure 1: One of four pages of the final guide created

Related ARGnotes

Thoreau, R. What older people want from a walking stick. ARGnote 2015; 2(5).

Endnote

¹ American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons. How to use crutches, canes, and walkers <http://orthoinfo.org/topic.cfm?topic=a00181>

² Dean E, Ross J. Relationships among cane fitting, function, and falls. *Physical Therapy*. 1993; 73(8).

³ Bateni H, Maki B. Assistive Devices for balance and mobility: Benefits, demands, and adverse consequences. *Archives of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation*. 2005; 86(1): 134-145.