

## Wheelchair safety and etiquette

If you don't already know someone who uses a wheelchair, chances are that at some stage during your life, you will meet and possibly have to assist someone who does. But what should or shouldn't you do when meeting someone in a wheelchair? And what are the safe ways to manoeuvre a wheelchair in different situations?



When meeting someone in a wheelchair:

- If the situation is appropriate, offer to shake the person's hand even if they appear to have limited use of their arms. The action of personal contact helps to break down the barrier of non-acceptance.
- Always ask the person whether they would like assistance before helping them. Never assume that a person in a wheelchair needs your assistance—they may find this patronising.
- Never lean or hang on to a person's wheelchair. It is a part of their personal space.
- Always speak directly to the person in the wheelchair rather than speaking only to others nearby. You may appear to be dismissing the person in the wheelchair if you do not include them in the conversation.
- Remember that many people in wheelchairs have a purely physical rather than intellectual disability, even if their speech or appearance is affected.
- If you are having a lengthy conversation with someone in a wheelchair, consider sitting or kneeling down to put yourself on the same level.
- There is rarely any need to express sympathy towards a person in a wheelchair. Sympathetic stares, comments or touches are usually well meant but may be viewed by the person in the wheelchair as demeaning. Never assume that using a wheelchair is in itself a tragedy.
- It is also not usually necessary to try to avoid the topic of the person's disability or wheelchair use. People in wheelchairs often appreciate the opportunity to explain the nature of their disability or illness rather than have assumptions made about them.
- If a person in a wheelchair requests directions, include information about the distance, weather conditions and possible physical obstacles. These all affect the person's ability to travel and to access certain sites.
- Do not discourage children from asking questions about a wheelchair. Open communication assists in overcoming any fear or misleading attitudes towards people with disability.

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- If a person in a wheelchair has to transfer to a chair, toilet, car or bed, do not move the wheelchair out of their reach.
  - Be aware of the limitations and capabilities of the person in the wheelchair and don't be afraid to ask questions to obtain this information if necessary.

When it comes to assisting a person in a wheelchair to manoeuvre, the following points provide a few tips and safety aspects to consider in various situations:

### **Going up a step backwards**

- Reverse the wheelchair so the back is nearest the steps
- Tip the chair back and balance the weight on the back wheels
- Pull steadily upwards
- Move back until there is sufficient room to put down all wheels.

This method can be used to go up multiple steps.

### **Going up a step forwards**

- Tip the chair back so the front wheels clear the step
- Place the front wheels on top of the step
- Push steadily and firmly until the large wheels ride up
- Ensure the wheelchair is safely on the flat surface.

### **Going down steps**

This should generally be performed with the wheelchair going backwards to prevent the person in the wheelchair from being tipped forwards.

- Reverse the wheelchair to the edge of the step
- Lower the rear wheels down the step
- Lower front wheels.

### **Pushing a wheelchair downhill**

When the gradient is very steep, it is advisable to go down backwards to prevent the person in the wheelchair from being tipped forwards.

### **Folding a wheelchair**

- Remove any cushions or backrests
- Lift the footplates
- Stand to one side of the wheelchair and lift the seat upholstery from the front and back.

### **Unfolding a wheelchair**

- Lean the wheelchair to one side against your body
- Hold onto the push handle nearest to you

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- Place your hands flat on the inner seat frame furthest away from you
  - Push down firmly, keeping fingers clear of the edge of the seat frame.

## Putting a wheelchair into a car

- Remove any cushions or backrests
- Remove footplates, armrests and wheels (if wheels are quick-release)
- Fold the wheelchair and engage the brakes
- Bend your knees, maintain natural curves of your spine and lean the wheelchair frame towards you
- Grasp both sides of the wheelchair frame and roll the chair up onto your thighs
- Straighten your legs to lift the chair up and into the boot
- Remember to use your leg muscles, not your back.

## Contacting the Independent Living Centre

For further information or to make an appointment to visit the display please contact the Independent Living Centre. The Independent Living Centre offers free advice on equipment and techniques to help you with everyday tasks.

Independent Living Centre  
11 Blacks Road  
Gilles Plains SA 5086

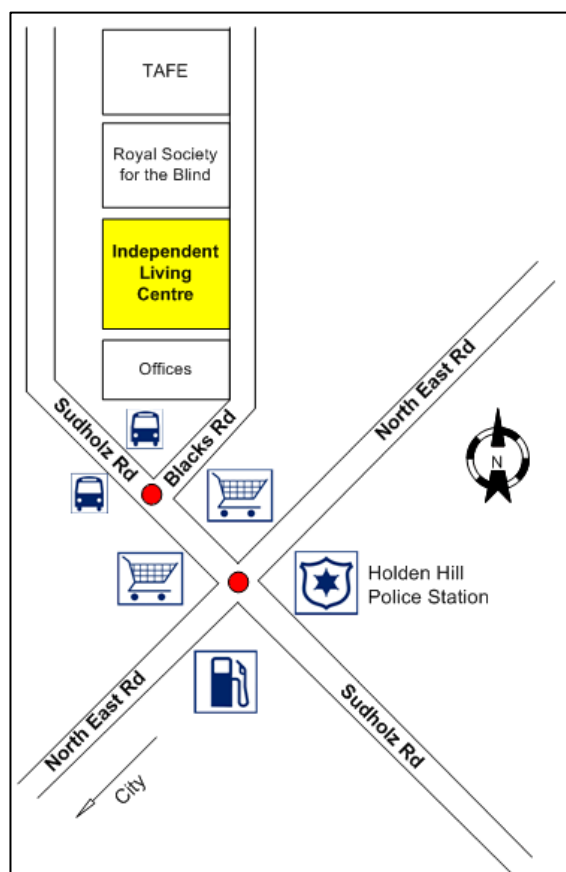
Phone: 1300 885 886 (SA & NT callers only) or 8266 5260

Email: [ilcsa@dcsi.sa.gov.au](mailto:ilcsa@dcsi.sa.gov.au)

Website: [www.sa.gov.au/disability/ilc](http://www.sa.gov.au/disability/ilc)

Accessible off street parking is available.

Bus services run nearby. Call 8210 1000 for timetable information.



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