

## THE WHITE CANE: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

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The white cane is a tool used by individuals with all levels of visual impairment to help navigate the world around them. It's more than a tool, though; it's a symbol of freedom and independence that allows individuals to make their own decisions on where and when to go somewhere. Some may think that using a cane is a sign of weakness and helplessness. Not so! Actually, when individuals use a white cane, they show that they possess a strong level of self-acceptance and inner strength.

The white cane became the preferred tool of travel for the visually impaired after wounded veterans returned from World War II. Today, it's a worldwide symbol of visual impairment that helps remind sighted individuals to show courtesy to people with vision issues.

White canes serve three primary functions. First, they preview the direct path ahead, giving the user confidence for the next step. Secondly, they protect the traveler from obstacles and drop-offs they may encounter while walking. Finally, white canes identify the user as being visually impaired. Canes typically are either totally or mostly white with a red section at the bottom, and come in a variety of styles and materials such as aluminum, fiberglass and graphite. The cane tip comes in multiple sizes and shapes as well.

With a wide variety of white canes and cane tips on the market, how do individuals with low or no vision determine which ones would be best for them? Thankfully, Certified Orientation & Mobility (O&M) Specialists are available to help. Their aid is particularly vital for the consumer since most types of white canes require that a professional train the user. Thanks to their specialized training, O&M specialists can determine proper cane selection, and are therefore the primary distributor of canes to consumers.

O&M Specialists tailor their instructional style to each individual's unique needs and abilities. To do that, the O&M Specialist first conducts a thorough evaluation, and then designs a specialized O&M training program, taking into account such things as the person's eye condition, other health conditions and medical needs, their personal circumstances, and their short-term and long-term goals.

A standard white cane (sometimes referred to as a long cane) has four parts: the grip, shaft, tip and the inside band which holds it together. When held in front of the body, this type of cane gives the traveler warning of curbs and other potential obstacles such as drop-offs and stairs. The cane protects the traveler from accidentally bumping into others, and helps others be more aware of a traveler's visual impairment. Travelers move the cane in specific ways to allow themselves time to react to changes in their environment. Simply put, a white cane is a tool that allows consumers to travel safely.

By using a cane, consumers are not just thinking about their safety, but also the well-being of others.

Though single-colored canes are an option, it's worth considering that the color a consumer chooses can have a significant impact on the traveler's visibility, especially when crossing streets. Single-color canes are neither reflective nor recognized by the White Cane Law. (For more information, see the section titled "White Cane Law.") This means that if a person chooses to carry a single-colored cane, the liability is solely upon the user. The red-and-white shaft of the standard cane reflects well in low light, offering greater visibility to drivers. Because of that, O&M Specialists strongly discourage the use of single-colored canes.

Consumers can choose from either rolling or non-rolling tips, which can either hook onto the cane, slip on, or screw onto the bottom of the cane. (Screw-on, or "threaded" tips, are rarely used.) The type of tip recommended by the O&M Specialist depends on the consumer's environment and other health issues. Consumers should not lean on the long cane to help balance themselves, as the canes usually are not strong enough to support the full weight of an individual, and can break under pressure.

Most consumers prefer folding canes, which are portable and easier to store. Occasionally an O&M Specialist might recommend a rigid cane if the consumer asks for one, or if he/she would benefit from using one because of special circumstances unique to the consumer.

It is critically important, therefore, that a Certified O&M Specialist measures and fits consumers with an appropriate cane. The specialist will consider consumers' physical dimensions in order to provide them with canes they can use comfortably when receiving instruction. Furthermore, the specialist will look at many factors in determining the type of cane needed for consumers such as height, gait, stride length, pace, body mechanics, and other health conditions that may affect their mobility. An incorrect cane length can lead to dangerous situations and potential injury for the user. Proper cane length also allows the O&M Specialist to prevent consumers from developing incorrect habits, which may lead to further problems in orientation. When needed, experienced specialists also can recommend an appropriate cane to individuals who use either a walker or wheelchair.

Using a cane is just one aspect of O&M training. Proper O&M training is a sequential process that teaches individuals how to use their remaining senses to know where they are within their environment and how to move safely to the next destination. It takes time and a commitment to learn how to interpret the information received from the cane and put into practice all of the orientation concepts that allow for independent travel. Much like learning to read, the process can seem long but is definitely worth the effort.

If you would like more information about Orientation and Mobility training, feel free to call or e-mail your counselor.