

Supporting Students with Physical Disabilities



A student with a physical disability may be unable to:

- Control spontaneous limb movements
- Control speed of movements
- Move quickly or in a well-coordinated manner
- Perform manual tasks such as gripping and turning a handle, holding a pen and typing
- Move arms or legs sufficiently to negotiate stairs and perform other actions
- Walk distances, stand for extended periods or getting in or out of a vehicle without assistance
- Reach, pull, push, manipulate
- Perform tasks that require endurance and strength

A student with a physical disability may use a cane, crutches, walker, brace, wheelchair, scooter, support person or service animal. Students using wheelchairs and scooters can't always take the most direct route and may need additional time to travel between buildings on campus.

Physical assistance and punctuality

Provide time for persons to move or perform tasks independently. Offer assistance; however, do not provide it without asking unless the need is urgent.



Students with physical disabilities may contend with issues outside the classroom which can affect punctuality or attendance. Attendant care, transportation arrangements medical care, etc., are all very time-consuming, and the reliance on other people for these services can cause time constraints beyond a student's control. Flexibility and understanding on the part of instructors will reduce stress and allow the student to focus on their learning.

Invisible Physical Disabilities

Not all physical disabilities are visible. A student may have difficulty performing some tasks yet may not otherwise appear to have a disability. And, students' abilities may vary with changes in their illnesses. Conditions in which a disability may not be visible or may be intermittently visible include:

- Arthritis
- Heart and peripheral vascular disease
- Multiple sclerosis and other progressive neurologic conditions
- Joint replacements
- Haemophilia
- Cancer
- Diabetes
- Parkinson's disease

Best Practices

In Your Classroom

- Adopt Universal Design for Learning (UDL) strategies. UDL benefits all students and promotes a respectful classroom climate with: clear expectations and feedback; a variety of ways to demonstrate knowledge; natural learning supports; multimodal teaching methods; and technology to enhance learning
- Ensure accessible desks are available for students who need them.
- Some students may require an adjustable chair or other furnishings. Work with Centre for Accessible Learning staff to make the necessary arrangements.
- Arrange information and handouts so they can be seen and picked up without undue bending and turning.
- Make class assignments available in electronic format.
- Ensure access to exits are clear.

In Your Lab

- Offer assistance, but don't provide it without asking – unless the need is urgent.
- Position lab equipment and supplies within reach.
- Allow extra time for setting up and completing work.
- Consider using a document camera to demonstrate on a large screen.
- Make containers with handles available.
- Discuss safety concerns, bearing in mind that students may not be able to react quickly to dangerous situations.
- Pair the student with another student who can do fine motor manipulations.
- Use plastic instead of glass where possible.
- Keep the lab uncluttered and aisles clear. Ensure emergency exits are wheelchair accessible.

When Conducting Field Work

- Try to have field trips in accessible locations.
- Consider alternate assignments if they would not compromise academic integrity (e.g., review video of field work, analyze samples other students have collected, write a paper on the topic)

When Communicating

- Don't hesitate to offer a handshake to a person with a missing or artificial limb, or to those who use a cane or crutches.
- Position yourself in front of the person so they don't have to change position to face you.
- Make eye contact and don't stand too close.
- Sit when speaking with a short person or person in a wheelchair.

Things to Avoid

- Bending over during conversations
- Pushing, pulling or leaning against a wheelchair without permission
- Lifting, supporting or moving a person unless you are asked to and understand safe techniques.

Accommodations that may be arranged by CAL

In Class

- Class materials including handouts provided in advance for creation of alternate format
- In-class transcriber
- Taped lectures
- Attendant assistance
- Reserved seating and height adjustable tables
- Use of adaptive equipment such as a portable CCTV and laptop

Exams

- Additional time
- Computer to enable screen reading or other alternate format
- Scribe