



How to Use a Cane for the Blind

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Acquiring the skill to use a travel cane is the key to independence for hundreds of thousands of people the world over who are blind or have very limited vision. This wasn't always the case. The modern travel cane for the blind was invented during World War Two when Richard Hoover of the Valley Forge Veterans Hospital developed this long cane as a better travel aid for blinded veterans. Today a visually impaired person who has become skilled in the use of the cane can walk nearly anywhere almost as easily as a sighted person. The key to mastering the travel cane is concentration on what you are doing and a willingness to put in a lot of practice time. The following steps describe the basic skills required to use a cane for the blind.

1. Hold the cane in one hand at about waist height and angled so the tip touches the ground directly ahead. The tip of the cane will rest on the ground about 2-3 feet ahead of your feet. This is the reason for making the cane much longer than a regular walking cane. The length allows the user to know what is in front of him/her before obstacles are reached.
2. Sweep the cane back and forth in an arc wide enough to go slightly to your left and right. Don't drag the cane across the ground. Instead, tap the ground every few inches as you sweep the cane ahead of you. This keeps the cane from being damaged by constant scraping and prevents it from being caught in cracks or holes. More important, the sound of the tapping provides the best information about what is ahead.
3. Pay attention to each tap of the cane. With practice you will be able to detect even small changes in elevation as well as upcoming steps and obstacles.
4. Listen to the sound the cane makes when it strikes the ground. This will tell you if the texture of the ground ahead is about to change. A clicking scrape means you are approaching concrete and a softer thud indicates asphalt. As you use the cane more you will learn to identify many surfaces by the sound of the cane tip hitting them.
5. Recognize the limits of the cane and stay alert to other clues about your surroundings like the sound of approaching cars or a change in sound that indicates you are entering an intersection.
6. Hold the cane next to your body (straight up and down) when you are not walking. This keeps it out of the way of passers-by (and keeps them from accidentally stepping on and breaking the cane).

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