MADISON NEUROLOGY · NEUROLOGY SYMPTOM GUIDE

Difficulty walking or an abnormal gait

Structured history, interpretation & clinical review

Symptom 37 of 94
Clinical educational workbook
Version 1.0 · October 2026

Not for clinical use. This guide cannot diagnose, triage, or exclude an emergency. Seek emergency care for severe, sudden, or worsening symptoms.

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> **Document purpose**
> A structured educational history and diagnostic-reasoning workbook. Treatment is outside its scope.

Scope and safe use

Walking difficulty and falls are classified by gait pattern, weakness, sensation, coordination, parkinsonism, pain, vision, cognition, medication, and environmental context.

Not for clinical use.
This educational workbook does not diagnose, triage, estimate probability, replace examination, or exclude an emergency. If a safety-screen answer is Yes or uncertain, follow the stated action rather than continuing routine interpretation.

How to complete the workbook

- Record the current episode and the person’s usual baseline; use a witness account for events with impaired awareness.
- Check one option per question unless a clinician documents a different combination. “Not sure” is unresolved information, not a negative answer.
- Complete the safety screen before all other sections. Record exact onset or last-known-well time for sudden deficits.
- Use Section 2 only after the form is complete. More than one pattern may be relevant; urgency takes precedence.
- Use Section 3 to plan focused examination and clinician-selected investigations. No test is automatic or universally required.

Specific escalation rule

New severe headache, new focal weakness or numbness, new speech/language difficulty, reduced consciousness, a prolonged seizure, severe breathing or swallowing difficulty, sudden visual loss, or rapidly progressive weakness requires emergency assessment. Call 911 in the United States.

Section 1: Input form

Checkbox history for Difficulty walking or an abnormal gait

1A. Immediate safety screen

Is there new face droop, one-sided weakness or numbness, difficulty speaking or understanding, double vision, or severe loss of coordination?

☐ No ☐ Yes ☐ Not sure

If Yes: Call emergency services now and record the exact time the person was last known well.

Is there new confusion, reduced consciousness, a seizure, or difficulty awakening?

☐ No ☐ Yes ☐ Not sure

If Yes: Call emergency services now. Do not leave the person alone or give food, drink, or medication by mouth.

Is there new severe breathlessness, inability to swallow saliva, blue lips, or rapidly worsening weakness?

☐ No ☐ Yes ☐ Not sure

If Yes: Call emergency services now; breathing and swallowing problems can become critical quickly.

Is there sudden loss of vision, a new missing visual field, or a painful red eye?

☐ No ☐ Yes ☐ Not sure

If Yes: Seek emergency eye or emergency-department assessment now.

> **Stop rule:** Any Yes answer triggers the action printed under that question. Any Not sure answer requires prompt in-person clarification; do not treat it as No.

1B. Timeline

How did the symptom begin?

☐ Suddenly, over seconds or minutes ☐ Over hours to days ☐ Gradually over weeks or months ☐ Longstanding or since childhood ☐ Not sure

Use the first occurrence for recurrent episodes; use the current episode for a changing symptom.

What is the overall course?

☐ One persistent episode ☐ Separate recurrent episodes ☐ Steadily worsening ☐ Fluctuating or variable ☐ Currently resolved

Has this exact pattern been assessed before?

☐ Definitely new ☐ The same pattern occurred before ☐ Present and stable for a long time ☐ Not sure

1C. Discriminating features

Which walking description fits best?

☐ Small steps, shuffling, or freezing ☐ Wide-based, veering, or staggering ☐ Leg weakness, dragging, or foot drop ☐ Pain-limited or favoring one side

How do falls occur?

☐ Tripping on toes or uneven surfaces ☐ Backward or without warning ☐ Legs give way ☐ No falls, only gait change

Is starting, turning, or passing through doorways especially difficult?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Not sure

What support is currently required?

☐ Independent ☐ Cane, walker, or one-person support ☐ Cannot stand or walk even with support

1D. Associated findings

Are there other neurological symptoms—weakness, numbness, speech change, double vision, swallowing difficulty, or severe imbalance?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Not sure

Are there systemic clues—fever, weight loss, cancer, infection risk, pregnancy/postpartum status, or a new medication?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Not sure

How much does this affect daily activity?

☐ Noticeable but activities continue ☐ Some activities are limited ☐ Cannot perform usual activities ☐ Not sure

1E. Clinical context

Who is being assessed?

☐ Adult or adolescent ☐ Child under 12 ☐ Adult aged 65 or older

Could a medicine, substance, withdrawal, or recent dose change be relevant?

☐ No plausible contributor ☐ Yes or possibly ☐ Not reviewed

Include sedatives, dopamine-blocking drugs, stimulants, decongestants, anticholinergics, alcohol, and non-prescribed substances when relevant.

Is there a relevant neurological, muscular, metabolic, cardiovascular, autoimmune, or sleep disorder?

☐ No known relevant condition ☐ Yes ☐ Not sure

What prior information is available?

☐ A previous examination or investigation ☐ Prior records but no clear explanation ☐ No useful prior assessment ☐ Not sure

Additional history and documentation

Record exact dates/times, witness details, relevant medication doses and changes, prior investigation reports, and the person’s baseline function.

Section 2: Interpreting the input form

Answer combinations generate a differential and an assessment pathway—not a diagnosis.

> **Precedence:** Emergency safety answers override every pattern below. Otherwise, the highest-urgency fully matched pattern takes precedence. If entries are incomplete, contradictory, or match no pattern, use the unresolved-information pathway.

Pattern 1: Parkinsonian or freezing gait pattern

Which walking description fits best? Small steps, shuffling, or freezing
Is starting, turning, or passing through doorways especially difficult? Yes

Prompt clinical review pattern — Promptly

Shuffling with start/turn/freezing difficulty follows a parkinsonian or higher-level gait assessment.

Differential to review:

- Parkinsonian, frontal, or higher-level gait disorder

Action: Arrange an in-person medical or neurological review promptly, usually within days. Seek sooner care if the pattern changes.

Pattern 2: Ataxic gait pattern

Which walking description fits best? Wide-based, veering, or staggering

Urgent assessment pattern — Same day

A new wide-based or staggering gait requires prompt cerebellar, vestibular, sensory, and toxic assessment.

Differential to review:

- Cerebellar, vestibular, or sensory ataxia

Action: Arrange same-day medical assessment. If symptoms are rapidly worsening or severe, call 911.

Pattern 3: Weakness-related gait pattern

Which walking description fits best? Leg weakness, dragging, or foot drop
How do falls occur? Tripping on toes or uneven surfaces / Legs give way

Prompt clinical review pattern — Promptly

Tripping or giving-way with a weak/dragging leg requires motor localization.

Differential to review:

- Weakness, radiculopathy, neuropathy, myelopathy, or musculoskeletal limitation

Action: Arrange an in-person medical or neurological review promptly, usually within days. Seek sooner care if the pattern changes.

Pattern 4: Inability to stand or walk

What support is currently required? Cannot stand or walk even with support

Urgent assessment pattern — Same day

New inability to stand or walk with support requires same-day in-person assessment.

Differential to review:

- Cerebellar, vestibular, or sensory ataxia
- Weakness, radiculopathy, neuropathy, myelopathy, or musculoskeletal limitation

Action: Arrange same-day medical assessment. If symptoms are rapidly worsening or severe, call 911.

Pattern 5: Pain-limited or multifactorial gait pattern

Which walking description fits best? Pain-limited or favoring one side
How do falls occur? No falls, only gait change / Tripping on toes or uneven surfaces

Structured clinical review pattern — Routine review

Pain-limited gait without reported acute deficits can begin with musculoskeletal and multifactorial fall assessment.

Differential to review:

- Weakness, radiculopathy, neuropathy, myelopathy, or musculoskeletal limitation
- Medication, visual, cardiovascular, environmental, or multifactorial falls

Action: Arrange a routine in-person clinical review. New, severe, or worsening symptoms change this pathway.

Unresolved-information pathway: The entries need structured in-person characterization.

Prompt clinical review pattern — Promptly

Do not guess missing answers or convert uncertainty into reassurance. Document what is unknown, perform an in-person examination, clarify the timeline with a witness or records when available, and reassess if any new feature appears.

Action: Arrange an in-person medical or neurological review promptly, usually within days. Seek sooner care if the pattern changes.

Section 3: Clinical review

Diagnostic modules and focused investigation logic

The examination comes before a test list. Select investigations only after localization, urgency, comorbidity, pregnancy status, renal function, anticoagulation, and prior results have been considered.

3.1 Parkinsonian, frontal, or higher-level gait disorder

Discriminating features: Shuffling, freezing, turning/start difficulty, or cognitive/urinary associations.

Logical investigations: Neurological gait and cognitive examination; brain imaging and specialist assessment when progression or atypical signs occur.

3.2 Cerebellar, vestibular, or sensory ataxia

Discriminating features: Wide-based/veering gait, coordination findings, vertigo, or proprioceptive loss.

Logical investigations: Eye, coordination, hearing, position-sense and Romberg examination; targeted imaging, hearing or neuropathy evaluation.

3.3 Weakness, radiculopathy, neuropathy, myelopathy, or musculoskeletal limitation

Discriminating features: Foot drop, leg weakness, spasticity, pain, or joint restriction changes gait mechanics.

Logical investigations: Strength, reflex, tone, spine and joint examination; electrodiagnostics or imaging according to localization.

3.4 Medication, visual, cardiovascular, environmental, or multifactorial falls

Discriminating features: Sedatives, orthostatic symptoms, poor vision, home hazards, and multiple small contributors commonly combine.

Logical investigations: Medication/orthostatic/vision review, gait-balance assessment, home-risk and fall-injury evaluation.

Reassessment and documentation

- If the symptom pattern changes, repeat the safety screen and timeline rather than carrying forward an earlier interpretation.
- If a test is unrevealing but the deficit persists or progresses, revisit localization and seek specialist review; a normal result does not automatically end assessment.
- If symptoms resolve, document duration, completeness of recovery, recurrence, and any residual deficit. Resolved sudden focal symptoms can still require urgent vascular assessment.
- If the history and examination conflict, obtain collateral information and in-person review rather than forcing a single diagnostic label.

Selected references

Sources provide background standards and do not replace local emergency pathways or current specialist guidance. Accessed October 2026.

1. National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. (2019, updated 2023). *Suspected neurological conditions: recognition and referral (NG127)*. https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng127