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Pope Francis is helped by his aids as he holds his weekly general audience in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican, Wednesday, March 6, 2024. (AP/Gregorio Borgia)

by Associated Press

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Pope Francis [again asked an aide to read his remarks](#) and was unable to get back onto his popemobile Wednesday, as lingering respiratory and mobility problems continued to take their toll on the 87-year-old pontiff.

Francis presided over his weekly general audience, held outside for the first time this year in a chilly St. Peter's Square. But he had an aide read his catechism lesson, as he has done for the past several days.

Last Wednesday, Francis [went to the hospital](#) for unspecified diagnostic tests, the results of which have not been released. He has been suffering on and off this winter from what he and the Vatican have said was a cold, bouts of bronchitis and the flu.

Late last year, Francis underwent a CAT scan that ruled out pneumonia, but the pope was still forced to call off a trip to the Gulf because of a bad bout of acute, infectious bronchitis.

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Francis has also been [suffering](#) from a fracture in the knee and inflammation of its ligaments that starting in 2022 pushed him to use a wheelchair. But he has usually managed to get around with a cane or walker and the help of aides to get him to a standing position.

On Wednesday, however, Francis appeared unable to climb up the few steps to board his popemobile at the end of his audience, even while grasping onto the handrails. Aides quickly brought back his wheelchair and he sat back down. He then greeted the crowd before being wheeled out of the piazza.

The Argentine pope had part of one lung removed as a young man because of a respiratory infection, and he often speaks in a whisper even when not sick. In 2021, he had a chunk of his colon removed and last year had surgery to repair an abdominal hernia and remove intestinal scar tissue.