

STROKE

WHAT IS A STROKE?

Stroke risk factors

Uncontrollable factors

- Age
- Gender
- Family history of stroke
- Family history of heart disease
- If you have diabetes
- Ethnicity (Afro-Caribbean or from south Asia)
- Previous stroke

Controllable factors

- Smoking
- Excessive drinking
- Obesity
- High blood pressure
- Physical inactivity
- Irregular heart beat
- High cholesterol

Remember: The more active you are, the more benefits you will get.

Be active - be safe - have fun!

For more information

- BBC Online Health www.bbc.co.uk/health/stroke
- Different Strokes 0845 130 7172 or www.differentstrokes.co.uk
- NHS Direct 0845 4647 or www.nhsdirect.co.uk
- SportEX Health - information on physical activity www.sportex.net
- The Stroke Association 0845 303 3100 www.stroke.org.uk

Local information



Your brain requires a constant supply of blood to function normally. A stroke can happen when the blood supply is disrupted in some way. The most common cause of is a blockage in the blood vessel. But in a few people a stroke is caused by a blood vessel weakening and becoming damaged, this can lead to bleeding from the vessel into the brain tissue. When the blood supply is slowed or stopped to an area of the brain, the brain cells don't get their usual supply of oxygen and other important nutrients. When this happens an area of brain tissue becomes damaged.

When brain cells become damaged and die, some functions, which that area of the brain once controlled, are lost. This may be loss of movement of one side of the body, speech or sensory awareness.

Strokes can affect any person at any age but there are some people who have a higher risk of having a stroke. Some of these risk factors are uncontrollable but some are controllable through medication and by changing your lifestyle (see Stroke Risk Factors box on back page).

Remember if you have had a stroke or mini-stroke it doesn't necessarily mean you cannot exercise regularly. It may mean you have to find other ways in which to exercise compared with before your stroke. Whatever you manage to do it will be well worth the effort.

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PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AFTER A STROKE

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How does physical activity help if you have had a stroke?

- One of the results of a stroke may be the loss of movement. Physical activity can help build strength in other muscles to help with movement as well as stimulate improvement in the muscles affected by the stroke.
- Activity helps prevent stiffness in both your joints and muscles which could hamper your recovery.
- Physical activity can result in improvements in balance and in sensation and feeling in the limbs.
- It also helps combat and reduce tiredness and the effort associated with doing everyday tasks and help you cope more easily on a day to day basis.
- Regular physical activity is a crucial tool in helping increase energy expenditure (burn calories) and can contribute to weight loss which in turn reduces your risk of having a further stroke.
- It also helps reduce high blood pressure and reduces high blood cholesterol levels – both are risk factors associated with strokes (see Stroke Risk Factors table on back page).
- Additional general benefits of physical activity include reductions in stress, the risk of bowel cancer, osteoporosis and the risk of falling.

What type of activity is best?

This very much depends on the severity of your stroke and how it has affected you. It may be difficult for you to do the normal type of exercise such as walking, jogging or swimming. If you want to try one of these types of exercise then it would be best to talk to your physiotherapist first. Your physiotherapist will also be able to help devise the most appropriate programme for you.

There are four forms of exercise that can be very beneficial if you have suffered a stroke:

- Stamina-type activities:** These are activities that help improve the fitness of your heart such as walking on a treadmill or cycling on a static bike.
- Strength-type activities:** These should be individualised for you personally to work on strengthening specific weak muscles using free hand weights or resistance equipment in the gym.
- Task-specific activities:** These activities revolve around modifying, adjusting and practising daily tasks that are most important to you and that you find most difficult.
- Stretching-type activities:** These activities prevent your muscles from shortening and hampering your movements.

Some targets to work towards

- The most important thing is trying to do something you will enjoy. Where possible involve your friends and family to make your activities fun, sociable and enjoyable.
- Challenge yourself to do more of what you are doing already eg. standing for longer, walking a bit further, climbing the stairs more times a day.
- Try not to do everything with your stronger side. Try activities like putting weight through your weaker leg when standing and use your weaker hand whenever possible.
- Keep your muscles flexible by stretching and moving regularly. Examples might be, stretching and moving your fingers, making sure your foot is fully flat on the floor, stretching your back (arching and turning) and avoiding a slumped sitting posture for long periods of time.
- Think of ways to incorporate exercise into your day or have a specific time which you allocate to doing your exercises. Try setting yourself targets eg. increasing the number of exercises, or a specific goal such as walking out into the garden again.
- Focus on practising things that you most want to be able to do or that are most important to you. For example getting out of your chair or drinking from your favourite mug.
- **Remember:** If you have had a stroke or a mini-stroke it doesn't mean you can't exercise regularly. It may mean you have to find other ways in which to exercise compared with before you had your stroke.

Staying safe

- Physical activity is safe if you start slowly and build up gradually to the recommended levels.
- If you do not know how much physical activity you can do safely or you have other medical concerns such as arthritis, ask your GP or practice nurse for advice.
- Avoid exercising after a heavy meal or exercising outside in the cold. Both of these increase the work of your heart.
- If you also get angina, using a GTN spray or tablet before an activity can help.

If you get any of the following problems stop and ask for medical advice from your GP or by contacting NHS Direct (see next page)

- Discomfort in your chest or upper body brought on by physical activity.
- Uncomfortable or severe breathlessness during your activity.
- Dizziness, nausea on exertion or cold and clammy skin.
- Fainting during or just after doing physical activity.
- Palpitations (a very fast or irregular heart beat) during activity.