6. Running exercise classes

Many stroke support groups organise exercise and physical activity sessions for their members. But exercise is a specialist activity, and for this reason groups are advised to think very carefully about how and why they want to organise exercise sessions, as well as to make sure the health and wellbeing of members is protected. This factsheet will set out the main areas to consider when thinking about arranging group exercise sessions.

This factsheet is intended to be a guide to those considering, or already, running exercise sessions as part of the group’s programme of activities. It is not exhaustive, and merely highlights the key areas concerned with ensuring safe exercise sessions.

Benefits of physical activity

We all know that exercise is important. The government recommends that adults should aim for at least 30 minutes of moderate physical activity on five or more days a week. Research shows that regular physical activity helps:

- Reduce the risk of stroke and heart disease
- Increase muscle strength and flexibility
- Reduce the risk of falls
- Reduce the risk of developing Type II diabetes
- Reduce and help control blood pressure
- Reduce stress and anxiety
- Improve balance and coordination
- Enhance quality of sleep

(Taken from British Heart Foundation Patient Networks Development Toolkit 11 on Physical Activity)

For stroke survivors, exercise has the additional benefits of helping with recovery, and in preventing further strokes.
Getting started

As with all elements of running a group, it is important to be sure of the need for an activity. For this reason, it is a good idea to do some research into what is already on offer locally, and to ask members if they are interested in the group providing an opportunity for exercise.

Once you’ve established the need, you’ll need to make sure everyone involved is clear on the purpose for setting up exercise sessions. We all know that exercise is important, but what does the group hope to achieve in organising opportunities for physical activity? There could be many reasons:

- To promote physical activity as part of a healthy lifestyle
- To aid members in their recovery from stroke
- To encourage social support and friendship in the group
- To provide an opportunity for appropriate exercise that doesn’t exist elsewhere in the local community

Whatever the reasons, be clear about what they are. Being clear on the aims will help with the next bit – deciding what sort of exercise to offer. The most common is seated exercise classes, but some groups offer different activities such as group swimming sessions, yoga, tai chi, and group walking sessions. You may want to talk to other groups in making this decision and benefit from their experience, and even learn from their mistakes.

Where and when

Whatever activity your group wants to organise, thought will need to be given to where it is going to be run, and how often.

Most seated exercise sessions are run in the group’s regular meeting place. Swimming activities will obviously have to take place in a pool. Below is a checklist of things to consider in choosing a venue:

- Is there enough space for the activity?
  - Is there a maximum number of people who can take part?
Hints & Tips for Stroke Clubs
6. Running exercise classes

☐ Is there adequate lighting, heating and ventilation?
   Remember you’ll be exercising in summer and winter.

☐ Is there disabled access and facilities?
   If you’re organising swimming sessions, don’t forget that people need to get in and out of the pool, and get changed.

☐ Is the right equipment available?
   For example, for seated exercise you’ll need stable chairs and a plug socket for music. Stacking chairs are not always suitable – you may need to check with your instructor.

☐ Are there facilities for making or buying refreshments?

Exercise is most effective when it is done regularly, so think about how often you’re going to run sessions. Also, when they are going to be run i.e. at every group meeting, or as an additional session on a different day?

Choosing an exercise instructor

Exercise is a specialist activity that needs a specialist to run it. It should be fun, enjoyable, appropriate to each individuals’ needs, and most of all safe, and a qualified instructor will ensure all of these things.

The Stroke Association strongly recommends that no exercise in a group setting is undertaken without a qualified instructor to run it.

They should be either a registered and currently practising physiotherapist or be registered with the Register of Exercise Professionals, usually with a Level 3 qualification or higher.

There are a number of organisations you can go to find a qualified person. This list is not exhaustive and there are other organisations that can help.

- **EXTEND** - a charity that trains individuals to run safe and enjoyable seated exercise sessions for older people and those who are less able. They have a course on working with people affected by stroke which instructors can complete as part of their ongoing professional development.
Hints & Tips for Stroke Clubs
6. Running exercise classes

- **Keep Fit Association** – a provider of exercise teacher training;
- **Register of Exercise Professionals** – a list of qualified fitness instructors holding nationally recognised qualifications;
- **British Wheel of Yoga** – the governing body for yoga in the UK who hold a list of qualified teachers;
- **Swimming Teachers Association** – provider of swimming teacher, aquacise instructor and lifeguard training.
- **Local gyms** – both council-run and private gyms employ qualified fitness instructors, who may also be looking for extra work;
- **Local physiotherapy department** – they may have junior members of staff interested in gaining experience, or be able to advise about where to go to find someone suitable;

In choosing someone to run your sessions, don’t be afraid to interview them. You’ll want to make sure they are qualified and are going to fit in with your group. For example, you might want to ask them about their qualifications, experience of working with people affected by stroke, or how they’d work with people with communication difficulties. You may also want to ask them about their first aid qualifications and working with vulnerable adults, see *Health and safety* section below.

**Exercise sheets and videos**

Be wary of using exercise videos in a group setting. They set a standard pace that may not be appropriate for everyone. It is also advisable not to use exercise sheets that have been given to individuals. Again, they may include exercises that are not suitable for everyone, and have been written with individuals, not groups, in mind.

**Remember, a qualified person will ensure that the activity is safe, appropriate to individual’s needs, and most of all fun and enjoyable.**

**Health and safety**

Running safe exercise sessions is vital. Any exercise session run by a qualified person should carry minimal risks but there are a number of things to consider.
6. Running exercise classes

Risk assessment

Undertaking a risk assessment of the venue and activity is the best way to ensure that all health and safety concerns have been thought through. You can get a sample risk assessment form and advice on completing it from The Stroke Association.

Insurance

Qualified instructors and professionals should have their own professional liability insurance. You should ensure you’ve seen proof of insurance, and check it covers them away from their normal place of work. Don’t forget to tell the group’s insurer about the exercise sessions. There shouldn’t be any additional premium if you are using a trained and insured instructor.

First aid

All group sessions should have first aid cover. Professional instructors should have this qualification already. If you are undertaking swimming sessions, make sure a qualified lifeguard is on duty at all times.

Next of kin and medical information

As a matter of course, the group should ensure it holds information on all members’ medical history, as well as next of kind details. This information will be important for any instructor, and in case of ill health or an emergency.

Remember that the person leading the exercise retains the right to refuse someone from joining in the exercise session if they feel it is not appropriate for them.

Encourage members to let their health professionals know that they are taking part in exercise sessions, especially if the individual has multiple conditions.

Clothing and refreshments

Anyone joining in exercise should wear appropriate clothing. For seated exercise, this means loose fitting clothing and comfortable shoes that are flat and stay on whilst exercising e.g. trainers.
Hints & Tips for Stroke Clubs
6. Running exercise classes

Any sort of exercise can result in dehydration, so providing refreshments is essential, including plenty of water.

Working with vulnerable adults
As many stroke survivors are considered to be vulnerable adults, it may be appropriate for instructors to have been checked by the Disclosure and Barring Service. For example, EXTEND, a well-respected instructor training organisation, insist that all their instructors have been checked. The Stroke Association is able to advise further.

Ensuring all of the above are covered will help ensure that the group is providing safe, as well as enjoyable and beneficial exercise.

Funding
Providing exercise as part of your group’s activities in a safe and appropriate way does often come with some additional costs. These may include:

- Room hire, if sessions are held away from the usual group meeting;
- Transport, again if sessions are held away from the usual meeting place;
- Refreshments;
- Fitness instructor payment, usually around £25 to £30 a hour;

There are different ways to cover these costs:

- Those taking part in the exercise could be asked to contribute to the cost, bearing in mind that private classes often cost between £5 and £10 per person.
- The group could chose to cover all the costs from funds;
- The group could consider paying for a volunteer to be trained as a fitness instructor. This is probably most appropriate if the group wants to run seated exercise sessions. For example, EXTEND training costs around £500.
- Project funding could be sought locally. For example, some councils have grant schemes for new health or exercise related projects. Consider including the costs of volunteer training in this as grant making bodies are always looking to ensure sustainability and the development of volunteers.
Further information and support

**British Wheel of Yoga**
25 Jermyn Street, Sleaford, Lincolnshire, NG34 7RU
01529 306 851
[www.bwy.org.uk](http://www.bwy.org.uk)

**EXTEND**
2 Farm Place, Wheathampstead, Hertfordshire AL4 8SB
01582 832 760
[www.extend.org.uk](http://www.extend.org.uk)

**Keep Fit Association**
1 Grove House, Foundry Lane, Horsham, West Sussex RH13 5PL
01403 266 000
[www.keepfit.org.uk](http://www.keepfit.org.uk)

**Register of Exercise Professionals**
8-10 Crown Hill, Croydon, Surrey CR0 1RZ
020 8686 6464
[www.exerciseregister.org](http://www.exerciseregister.org)

**Swimming Teachers Association**
Anchor House, Birch Street, Walsall, West Midlands WS2 8HZ
01922 645 097
[www.sta.co.uk](http://www.sta.co.uk)
Hints & Tips for Stroke Clubs
6. Running exercise classes

Finally…

Staying active is important for all us, whether we’ve had a stroke or not, and group exercise is a great way of doing this. It is also a lot of fun.

However, the group has a responsibility to ensure that its activities are safe and suitable to individual’s needs. By following the above guidance, the group can ensure that everyone gets the most out of the exercise sessions.

Useful contacts

- Partnerships Team, Stroke Association
  020 7566 0323 / clubtogether@stroke.org.uk