

Exercise and stroke

Exercise is great for your health. It plays a vital role in reducing your risk of stroke and can improve your overall well-being. There are various ways in which you can be more active, even if you find it difficult to move around. This resource sheet explains how exercise can improve your health, suggests types of activities you could try, and includes organisations and resources that can help.

How can exercise improve my health?

Exercise can reduce your risk of having a stroke or transient ischaemic attack (TIA). It can also improve your physical and mental health by:

- reducing your risk of a number of conditions such as coronary heart disease, some cancers and type 2 diabetes
- lowering your blood pressure and cholesterol levels
- helping you to control your weight
- strengthening your heart and lungs
- increasing your muscle strength and flexibility
- improving your mood by increasing your endorphins (feel-good chemicals)
- improving your immune system
- aiding recovery after illness or injury
- increasing your energy levels
- improving your body image and self-esteem
- helping you to sleep better.

Regular exercise can reduce your risk of stroke by a quarter. Just 30 minutes of activity five days a week can reduce your risk.

Just being more physically active, as part of your daily routine, can also improve your health and reduce your risk of stroke. See page 2 for some suggestions.

Where do I start?

Before becoming more active speak to your GP, particularly if you have not done any exercise for some time. Also talk to your GP for advice if you are taking medication. Certain types of medication can reduce your ability to exercise. For example beta-blockers slow your heart rate and sedatives can cause drowsiness.

The type of exercise you choose will also depend on your interests, abilities and what is available in your local area. You may prefer to exercise outdoors or indoors, on your own or with others, at planned times or just as part of your daily routine.

Tips for exercising

To prevent injuries you should:

- **warm up** before you start – for example, walking for 10 minutes before running
- **cool down** afterwards by exercising at a slower pace, letting your heart rate slow down
- **stretch out** your muscles at the end.

What shall I choose?

It is good to choose an activity that increases your heart rate, makes you feel warm and a little out of breath (moderate physical activity). Here are some suggestions:

Gentle activities

- walking to the shops
- taking the stairs instead of the lift
- walking the dog
- doing some gardening, DIY or housework
- taking a walk at lunchtime
- getting off the bus a stop early and walking the rest of the way
- yoga, tai chi or pilates.

Active exercise

- jogging
- swimming
- cycling
- going to the gym
- playing a team sport
- joining an aerobics class
- dancing
- using an exercise DVD.

Computer games consoles like the Wii, Playstation and Xbox offer many sport and exercise activities from tennis and bowling to dance and yoga. They are worth trying if

you already have the equipment. However if you have had a stroke, you may find that the movements you need to make to take part in the games can be too quick or complex. It is a good idea to try the simplest games first, starting at the lowest level, and building up gradually.

How much exercise should I do?

Adults should aim to do at least 30 minutes of moderate physical activity five or more times a week. You don't have to do all 30 minutes at once. This can be broken up into smaller blocks of time throughout the day. Your age, general health, and current level of activity will affect how much exercise you can do, but it's never too late to start becoming more active.

It's important to find a balance between how hard the exercise is, how long you exercise for and how often you exercise. You'll benefit more from doing regular exercise for longer periods of time, rather than exercising very vigorously for a short time or infrequently.

If you are looking to build up your fitness levels, you should begin by doing lighter exercise, and gradually increase the intensity over time. You should pace yourself and balance strenuous exercise with rest days.

Always stop if you experience pain.

When should I exercise?

You can exercise at any time of the day, although it's a good idea not to do any exercise for two to three hours following a heavy meal. Also, exercising just before you go to bed can make it difficult to get to sleep. Judging by how your body feels you will be able to decide what time suits you.

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To make sure that you keep active, it is best to fit activities into your daily routine.

How can I make it enjoyable?

To help you stay committed to exercising it is important you enjoy it. Here are some tips:

- Try something new – perhaps you've always wanted to have a go at dancing, now's your chance!
- Get an exercise partner – see if a friend or family member can join you and you can encourage each other.
- Exercise to music – play some music you enjoy and the time will soon pass.
- Reward yourself – set yourself some goals and reward yourself when you reach them. Your goal could be anything from walking further than last time, to keeping to your exercise plan.
- If you want to walk more, try checking your progress by using a pedometer. This is a small portable device that counts the number of steps you take and the distance you have walked.
- Use an online exercise tracker to record your progress. For more information see the resources section on page 7.
- Keep going – it might be hard at first, but it does get easier.

Exercising after a stroke

If you have recently had a stroke, you may not be able to exercise regularly straight away. You should only start exercising once you have recovered enough and only do as much as you can manage.

Talk to your doctor or therapist about what is right for you.

Whether you can go back to exercising the way you did before your stroke will depend on how your stroke has affected you. **You may need to adapt your activities, or try new ones.** If you are currently receiving physiotherapy, talk to your physiotherapist. They will be able to give you advice about suitable exercises and activities to try. For example, going to a gym (private or council run) may be an option if they have the right facilities and supervision. If you find it difficult to exercise whilst standing, you may be able to use an exercise bike.

If your mobility has been severely affected by your stroke, you may find **chair-based exercises** more suitable. These exercises are also recommended for elderly people. These involve doing a series of seated stretches and movements to increase your heart rate and exercise your muscles and joints. This kind of exercise can increase your strength and flexibility, and may also help improve your posture.

You may find it helpful to join a chair-based exercise class. These classes are held at local leisure centres, community centres, or in nursing or residential homes. Ask your GP about classes in your area. Some stroke clubs also have exercise sessions at their meetings. Contact us for details of clubs in your area. There are some organisations and resources for chair-based exercises listed at the end of this resource sheet.

Is it safe to exercise if I have high blood pressure?

It is safe for most people with high blood pressure to exercise and it can help to lower your blood pressure. When you exercise your blood pressure naturally rises for a short

time. However, once you stop exercising it returns to its usual level. The quicker it returns to normal, the fitter you are. If you have very high blood pressure, it may need to be lowered with medication before you can increase your activity levels. Speak to your doctor or nurse for advice.

The best activities to do to reduce high blood pressure are **aerobic exercises**. They are usually rhythmic and repetitive movements using the larger muscles in your body, and work out your heart and lungs. Examples of aerobic exercises are walking, dancing and swimming.

Some activities can be dangerous if your blood pressure is not under control such as sprinting, squash, scuba diving and weight lifting. You should talk to your doctor before beginning any of these.

How can I find out about local leisure clubs and services?

This resource sheet lists a number of organisations and resources providing information about ways to get active and start exercising. You can also usually find out about local leisure facilities, exercise classes, parks and places to walk from your local council or library.

It's worth finding out what is on offer at your local council leisure centre. Most centres run a variety of exercise classes to cater for a range of interests and fitness levels, for example aqua aerobics, zumba and yoga. In many areas you will find a swimming pool and gym, and there may be other facilities you can use such as tennis, badminton and squash courts. Generally council facilities are cheaper than ones run by private companies, although commercial

gyms and health clubs may also offer competitive rates and discounts. In many areas, local councils offer discount schemes for older people, people with disabilities, new members and people on certain benefits. This might enable you to take part in leisure activities, such as swimming, for free or at a reduced rate.

In a number of areas, local councils run **exercise referral schemes**. The schemes are aimed at people with medical conditions that could put their health at risk, and people who are not active. The scheme involves working with a trainer for a number of weeks. They will design an exercise programme to suit your needs and provide you with support and guidance. You will have several sessions a week, usually over 10 weeks, and over this time your progress will be monitored. To find out whether there is a scheme in your area and if you would be eligible, speak to your doctor.

Useful organisations

All organisations are UK wide unless otherwise stated.

Stroke Association

Stroke Helpline: 0303 3033 100

Email: info@stroke.org.uk

Website: stroke.org.uk

Contact us for information about stroke, emotional support and details of local services and support groups.

Different Strokes

Tel: 0845 130 7172

Website: www.differentstrokes.co.uk

This national charity for younger stroke survivors of working age runs exercise classes around the UK.

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Excel 2000 (England and Wales)

Tel: 01263 825 670

Email: excel2000@clara.co.uk

Website: www.excel2000.co.uk

A charity that helps people improve their mobility through movement with music. They produce a number of tapes and videos.

EXTEND: Movement to music for the over sixties and less able people

Tel: 01582 832 760

Email: admin@extend.org.uk

Website: www.extend.org.uk

EXTEND provides exercise classes for people over 60 and for all people with a disability.

Keep Fit Association

Tel: 01403 266 000

Email: kfa@emdp.org

Website: www.keepfit.org.uk

An organisation that offers exercise, movement and dance classes for all ages. Contact them to find out about groups in your area.

Later Life Training

Tel: 01567 820 477

Email: info@laterlifetraining.co.uk

Website: www.laterlifetraining.co.uk

They provide exercise training for health and leisure professionals working with older people. They also offer leaflets, books and DVDs about exercise. You can search for qualified instructors in your local area on their website.

Ramblers Association

Tel: 020 7339 8500

Email: ramblers@ramblers.org.uk

Website: www.ramblers.org.uk

The charity encourages more people to take up walking. They also work to provide better, more accessible walking environments.

Sportability

Tel: 0208 959 0089

Email: info@sportability.org.uk

Website: www.sportability.org.uk

A charity that provides sport and challenging pursuits for people with paralysis, including stroke survivors.

TCV - Green Gym

Tel: 01302 388 883

Email: information@tcv.org.uk

Website: www.tcv.org.uk/greengym

The national environmental conservation charity TCV runs a scheme to enable you to get active and help the environment at the same time.

Walking for Health (WfH)

Tel: 020 7339 8541

Email: walkingforhealth@ramblers.org.uk

Website: www.walkingforhealth.org.uk

Walking for Health encourages people to become physically active in their local community. They can provide details of walks in your local area as well as offering information, support and encouragement.

Walkit.com

Website: www.walkit.com

A website that helps you to plan your walking route within towns and cities around the UK.

England

English Federation of Disability Sport

Tel: 01509 227750

Website: www.efds.co.uk

The lead organisation for disabled people in sport throughout England. They have a list of gyms that have been approved as accessible and have highly trained gym staff who are experts in providing advice on adapted physical activity.

Bike Hub

Website: www.bikehub.co.uk

A website providing useful information about cycling for leisure or as part of your commute to work.

Change4Life

Tel: 0300 123 4567

Website: www.nhs.uk/change4life

They provide practical ideas and tips aimed at getting the whole family to move more, eat well and live longer.

NHS Choices

Website: www.nhs.uk/livewell

They provide lots of information about being active, including exercise guidelines and a number of 10 minute home workout programmes. You can also download workout plan podcasts.

Walk England

Tel: 07779 582 446

Email: mail@walkengland.org.uk

Website: www.walkengland.org.uk

A social enterprise creating local walking opportunities and offering walking advice and information.

Northern Ireland

Disability Sports NI

Tel: 028 9038 7062

Website: www.dsni.co.uk

Northern Ireland's main disability sports organisation. Provides information on a range of sports including events, clubs and courses for people with disabilities.

Get a Life Get Active

Website: www.getalifegetactive.com

This website provides information about how you and your family can incorporate more physical activity into your everyday lives.

Sport Northern Ireland

Tel: 028 9038 1222

Email: info@sportni.net

Website: www.sportni.net

The lead agency for the development of sport in Northern Ireland, dedicated to developing people in sport, and providing facilities for people of all abilities.

Scotland

Scottish Disability Sport

Tel: 0131 317 1130

Email: admin@scottishdisabilitysport.com

Website: www.scottishdisabilitysport.com

The Scottish governing body for all sports for people with a physical, sensory or learning disability.

Active Scotland

Website: www.activescotland.org.uk

A website developed by NHS Health Scotland to support healthcare professionals and patients. You can search on their website for activities and groups in your area.

Take Life On

Tel: 02920 825 793

Website: www.takelifeon.co.uk

A Scottish Government website suggesting ways to have a healthier lifestyle, including how to become more active.

Paths for All

Tel: 01259 218 888

Email: info@pathsforall.org.uk

Website: www.pathsforall.org.uk

An organisation promoting walking and improving your health in Scotland. Within the *Get Walking* section of their website you can search for health walks in your region.

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Jogscotland

Tel: 0131 539 7341

Email: membership@jogscotland.org.uk

Website: www.jogscotland.org.uk

They encourage people to get active by joining local jogging groups.

Wales

Disability Sport Wales

Tel: 0845 846 0021

Email: office@fdsw.org.uk

Website: www.disabilitysportwales.org

The lead organisation for the development of sport and physical activities for disabled people in Wales.

Sports Wales

Tel: 0845 045 0904

Email: info@sportwales.org.uk

Website: www.sports-council-wales.org.uk

Sports Wales is responsible for developing and promoting sport and active lifestyles. Find out about activities in your community and search for activities by type and location.

Health Challenge Wales

Tel: 02920 825 793

Website: www.healthchallengewales.org

They provide information and advice to help improve your health and well-being.

Useful resources

Age UK Advice

Tel: 0800 169 65 65

Website: www.ageuk.org.uk

Age UK produces a number of resources which can be ordered online or from their advice line.

- **Be Strong Be Steady DVD**

A programme of chair-based and standing exercises designed to

strengthen your muscles, increase your flexibility and improve your balance (£12 plus postage and packaging).

- **Strength and Balance Exercises for Healthy Ageing book**

This illustrated A4 work book contains exercises to help maintain strength and balance (£6 + postage and packaging).

- **Fit as a Fiddle**

Tel: 0800 169 8787

This five year project, run by Age UK is a nationwide programme to promote physical activity, healthy eating and mental well-being among people over 50. They will be producing exercise DVDs and other useful resources. Contact them to find out what is happening in your area.

Doing Sport Differently

Tel: 0207 250 3222

Website: www.radar.org.uk

A guide to exercise and fitness for people living with a disability or health condition, produced by Radar. The disability rights people. You can download it for free from the website or it costs £3.99 if you order a hard copy (including postage and packing).

Exercise for the Elderly

Tel: 01304 362 563

Email: info@exercisingsittingdown.com

Website: www.exercisefortheelderly.co.uk

They produce a range of easy-to-follow exercise DVDs for people of all levels of fitness. They cover both seated exercises that gently build stamina and energy, and gentle standing exercises to build strength and fitness.

Chartered Society of Physiotherapy (CSP) Guides

Tel: 020 7306 6666

Email: enquiries@csp.org.uk

Website: www.csp.org.uk

CSP produces a variety of guides including: *The easy exercise guide* – a leaflet explaining how you can do easy, effective exercise as part of your daily routine.

Rosie's Armchair Exercises

By Rosita Evans

2001, Discovery Books

Tel: 01932 400800

Website: www.discoverybooks.co.uk

A book explaining how you can do a complete body work out while sitting down. It costs £4.99, plus postage and packaging.

Gentle Exercises & Movement for Frail People

By Myfanwy Hook, 1997, Speechmark

This pack of 48 A5 laminated cards includes exercises for frail elderly people. Each card has the exercise instruction on the reverse. Some require small apparatus such as a ball. These can be purchased from Speechmark Publishing Ltd for £30.99 plus VAT. Call 01908 277 177 or visit the website: www.speechmark.net

Tracking your progress

There are many websites and apps that allow you to record the amount of exercise you do and your calorie intake. You can also keep track of your goals and your progress. Here are some examples:

Cardio trainer

www.worksmartlabs.com/cardiotrainer

Fitness Tracker

www.fitness-tracker.com

My Fitness Pal

www.myfitnesspal.com

Disclaimer: The Stroke Association provides the details of other organisations for information only. Inclusion in this factsheet does not constitute a recommendation or endorsement.

Produced by the Stroke Association's Information Service.

For sources used, visit stroke.org.uk

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Resources 7, version 1 published June 2013
(next review due March 2015).

Item code: **A01R07**



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