

Exercise and stroke

Even if your mobility is restricted after a stroke, it is likely you will be able to carry out some form of exercise to improve your overall wellbeing. This guide explains how exercise can improve your health, and suggests types of exercise and resources to help you to be more active.

How can exercise improve my health?

Exercise can reduce your risk of having a stroke or transient ischaemic attack (TIA). Just 30 minutes of moderate activity five days a week can reduce your risk of stroke by over 25%. It also has benefits for your physical and mental health including:

- lowering your blood pressure
- lowering your cholesterol levels
- reducing your risk of health problems like heart disease and type 2 diabetes
- helping you to lose weight if you need to, and maintain a healthy weight
- increasing muscle strength and flexibility
- helping to reduce levels of anxiety and depression
- increasing your energy levels
- improving self esteem
- helping you to sleep better.

Choosing exercise

Your choice of exercise will depend on your interests, your physical abilities and what is available in your local area. You may prefer to exercise outdoors or indoors, to exercise on your own or with others. If you want to be more active, you can try to move around more throughout the day, by doing things like walking the dog, gardening, or taking the stairs instead of a lift.

Before becoming more active or starting to exercise you should speak to your GP, particularly if you have not done any exercise for some time. The side effects of some kinds of medication may also affect your exercise choices.

Some types of exercise to choose from include walking, jogging, swimming and cycling. Some people enjoy going to the gym, playing a team sport or dancing. You can also use an exercise DVD or computer exercise game at home.

You can also try some types of exercise that improve flexibility, such as yoga and pilates.

How much exercise should I do?

Aerobic (raising your heart rate)

All adults, including those over 65, should try to be active daily. Aim for at least 150 minutes of moderate aerobic activity a week in total, or 75 minutes of vigorous aerobic activity.

- **Moderate aerobic activity** will raise your heart rate and make you feel warmer, but not too out of breath to speak. This can include cycling, walking, tennis and water aerobics. To achieve 150 minutes per week, you should do 30 minutes of physical activity five or more times a week.
- **Vigorous aerobic activity** makes you breathe hard, and you won't be able to talk much while exercising. It can include things like football, singles tennis, running, aerobics and fast swimming. In general, 75 minutes of vigorous activity can give similar health benefits to 150 minutes of moderate activity per week.

Strength building

As well as aerobic exercise, all adults need to do strength exercises on two or more days a week, aiming to work all the major muscles. You can do strength exercises at home, such as lifting small weights with your arms, or using a chair to support you doing leg exercises. You can also try using machines in the gym, with support from a trainer. To gain strength, you would need to repeat the exercises for a set number of times two or three times a week.

Some vigorous exercises count as both aerobic and muscle-strengthening, such as circuit training, running, football and aerobics.

Improving fitness

To help improve your fitness, you can gradually build up the amount of exercise you do. Remember to have rest days, and if you have fatigue, try to be aware what can trigger your fatigue. Always stop an exercise if you experience pain.

Even if you take plenty of exercise, moving around during the day, and avoiding sitting for long periods if you can, is also important for reducing your risk of diabetes and heart disease.

When should I exercise?

Some people prefer exercising in the morning, some later in the day. Judging by how your body feels you will be able to decide what time suits you. If you plan your exercise so that it fits into your daily routine, you might be more likely to keep going with it.

Avoiding injury

Before you exercise, you can avoid injury to your muscles by:

1. warming up before starting, for example walking slowly for 10 minutes before brisk walking
2. cooling down afterwards by lowering the intensity of the exercise and letting your heart rate decrease
3. stretching out your muscles at the end.

Food and drink

It's a good idea not to do any exercise for about three hours after a main meal such as breakfast or lunch. An hour before

exercising you could have a light snack containing some protein and carbohydrate, but low in fat. This could be yoghurt, a banana, or a glass of milk. Avoid foods that are fatty or hard to digest like crisps, nuts and raw vegetables.

Make sure you drink water regularly throughout the day beforehand, so you start your exercise well hydrated. After a session, replace lost fluids by drinking water. You could have milk or an isotonic drink if you exercised for more than an hour.

Enjoying exercise

To help you stay motivated, it is important you enjoy your exercise activities. You may wish to do the following:

- 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
- set yourself some goals and celebrate when you reach them. Your goal could be anything from walking further than last time, to keeping to your exercise plan for a week
- keep going – it might be hard at first, but it does get easier
- join a group – many people find being in a class or group makes an activity more enjoyable and social.

Exercising after a stroke

If you were already active or sporty before a stroke, 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 sports or activities, or try new activities. A physiotherapist or occupational therapist will be able to provide advice about adapting exercises, and finding new fitness activities you enjoy.

If you find it difficult to exercise while standing, you may be able to use an exercise bike or do seated exercises. Seated exercises can involve doing a series of stretches, as well as movements to increase your heart rate and exercise your muscles and joints.

You may find it helpful to join a class. Chair-based exercise classes can be held at local leisure centres, community centres, or in nursing or residential homes. Some stroke clubs also have exercise sessions at their meetings.

Contact our Stroke Helpline for details of clubs in your area. There are some organisations and resources for chair-based exercises listed at the end of this guide.

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

For most people with high blood pressure, exercise is safe and helps to reduce blood pressure.

If you have very high blood pressure, you should speak to your doctor before starting an exercise programme. You may need to reduce your blood pressure with medication before starting.

When you exercise your blood pressure naturally rises for a short time, but when you stop it soon returns to its usual level. The quicker it returns to normal, the fitter you are.

The best activities to reduce high blood pressure are aerobic exercises such as cycling, walking and swimming. You can follow some of the tips in this guide to become more active and stay motivated to get fit.

Local leisure clubs and services

You can 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 sports centres run a variety of exercise classes to cater for a range of interests and fitness levels.

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, though commercial gyms and leisure centres may also offer competitive rates and discounts.

Many local councils offer discount schemes for older people, people with disabilities and people on certain benefits. There may also be schemes for new members. This can 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 may put their health at risk, and people with non-active lifestyles.

The scheme involves working with a trainer for a number of weeks. They will design an exercise program to suit your needs and provide you with support and guidance.

To find out whether there is a scheme in your area and if you would be eligible, speak to your GP.

Where to get help and information

From the Stroke Association

Talk to us

Our Stroke Helpline is for anyone affected by a stroke, including family, friends and carers. The Helpline can give you information and support on any aspect of stroke.

Call us on **0303 3033 100**, from a textphone **18001 0303 3033 100** or email **info@stroke.org.uk**.

Read our publications

We publish detailed information about a wide range of stroke topics including reducing your risk of a stroke and rehabilitation. Read online at **stroke.org.uk** or call the Helpline to ask for printed copies.

Other sources of help and information

Walking and running

Jogscotland

Website: www.jogscotland.org.uk

Tel: 0131 273 3003

Jogscotland helps people get active by taking part in jogging groups.

Let's Walk Cymru (Wales)

Website: www.letswalkcymru.org.uk

Tel: 02920 644 308

An organisation that runs a number of walking projects across Wales and aims to increase the number of people participating in walking as a regular activity.

Paths for All (Scotland)

Website: www.pathsforall.org.uk

Tel: 01259 218 888

Email: info@pathsforall.org.uk

An organisation devoted to promoting walking and improving health in Scotland. On the website you can search for health walks in your region.

Ramblers Association

Website: www.ramblers.org.uk

Tel: 0207 339 8500 (England)

0131 472 7006 (Scotland)

029 2064 4308 (Wales)

A charity working to promote walking for health, leisure and transport and improve conditions for all walkers. Offers hundreds of walks each week from short strolls to longer treks.

Walking for Health (England)

Website: www.walkingforhealth.org.uk

Tel: 020 7339 8541

Walking for Health offers information, support and encouragement to complete beginners, existing walkers and health and leisure professionals. Offers over 1,800 short walks every week all over the country.

Walk Unlimited

Website: www.walkengland.org.uk

Tel: 07779 582 446

A social enterprise working in partnerships across the country to create local opportunities for people to choose to walk, to walk more often, to walk to more places, and to feel safe while doing so.

Cycling

Bike Hub (England)

Website: routes.bikehub.co.uk

A website providing useful information about cycling and a cycle route finder.

Cycling UK

Website: www.cyclinguk.org

Tel: 01483 238 301

Lists cycling events all over the UK, and allows you to search for cycling groups near you.

Gentle exercise

EXTEND

Website: www.extend.org.uk

Tel: 01582 832 760

Email: admin@extend.org.uk

EXTEND provides gentle exercise to music for older people and for anyone of any age with a disability.

TCV Green Gym

Website: www.tcv.org.uk/greengym

Tel: 0800 048 8673

Email: tcv@plmr.co.uk

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

Sport

Disability Sports NI

Website: www.dsni.co.uk

Tel: 028 9046 9925 (Belfast office)

028 3834 1333 (Craigavon office)

Northern Ireland's main disability sports organisation. Gives information on a range of sports and offers clubs and courses for people with disabilities.

Sportability (England)

Website: www.sportability.org.uk

Tel: 0208 959 0089

Email: info@sportability.org.uk

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

Sport Northern Ireland

Tel: 028 9038 1222

Website: www.sportni.net

The lead agency for developing sport in Northern Ireland. Operates a National Outdoor Training Centre at the base of the Mourne Mountains.

Sport Wales

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

Tel: 0300 300 3111

Email: info@sportwales.org.uk

Sport 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.

Advice and support

Active Scotland

Website: www.activescotland.org.uk

A website developed by NHS Health Scotland to support health care professionals and patients. You can use the websites search function to find activities and groups in your area.

Change4Life (England)

Tel: 0300 123 4567

Website: www.nhs.uk/change4life

Aimed at getting the whole family to change behaviours and move more, eat well and live longer.

Chartered Society of Physiotherapy (CSP)

Website: www.csp.org.uk

Tel: 020 7306 6666

Email: enquiries@csp.org.uk

CSP produces *The easy exercise guide*, a leaflet explaining how you can build easy, effective exercise into your daily routine. It also has guides on different exercises that can alleviate common aches and pains such as neck and back pain.

Get a Life Get Active (Northern Ireland)

Website: www.getalifegetactive.com

A website providing information about how you and your family can incorporate more physical activities into your everyday lives.

Health Challenge Wales

Website: www.healthchallengewales.org

Tel: 029 2022 7744

Provides information and advice to help improve health and wellbeing.

Keep Fit Association (England)

Website: www.keepfit.org.uk

Tel: 01403 266 000

Email: kfa@emduk.org

An organisation dedicated to the provision of safe and effective exercise, movement and dance for all ages. Contact them to find out about groups in your area.

NHS Choices

Website: www.nhs.uk/livewell

Provides advice on being active, including how to get fit without going to the gym and how to make housework a workout. Also has information about Couch to 5K, a free running plan for beginners that aims to prepare you for a 5km run in just nine weeks.

Take Life On (Scotland)

Website: www.takelifeon.co.uk

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

Books

Rosie's Armchair Exercises

Rosita Evans

2001, Discovery Books

A book explaining how you can do a complete body workout while sitting down, aimed at people who have difficulty exercising standing up.

Gentle Exercises & Movement for Frail People

Myfanwy Hook

1997, Speechmark

A pack of 48 A5 laminated cards, each of which illustrates and describes a specific exercise for frail or older people. Each card has the exercise instruction on the reverse. Some of the exercises require small apparatus such as a ball.

About our information

We want to provide the best information for people affected by stroke. That's why we ask stroke survivors and their families, as well as medical experts, to help us put our publications together.

How did we do?

To tell us what you think of this guide, or to request a list of the sources we used to create it, email us at feedback@stroke.org.uk.

Accessible formats

Visit our website if you need this information in audio, large print or braille.

Always get individual advice

Please be aware that this information is not intended as a substitute for specialist professional advice tailored to your situation. We strive to ensure that the content we provide is accurate and up-to-date, but information can change over time. So far as is permitted by law, the Stroke Association does not accept any liability in relation to the use of the information in this publication, or any third-party information or websites included or referred to.

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Together we can conquer stroke.

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