

Stroke  
Association

# Getting active after a **stroke**



# Why move more?

After a stroke, starting to be more active can be a massive boost to your recovery and your confidence.

Almost anyone can find a way to add movement into their daily life. You can be active in your home, and you don't need to do sports or join a gym.

## Being more active can:

- Help you to stay healthy and feel good.
- Reduce the chance of another stroke.
- Improve your balance and muscle strength.
- Reduce fatigue and lessen pain.
- Improve your mood.
- Build up stamina.



If you're not sure which activities are safe for you because of a disability or a health condition, ask your GP or therapist for advice. Physiotherapists and occupational therapists can help you work out new ways of doing things.

Whether your stroke was recent or many years ago, moving more can make a difference to your wellbeing.



## Find what works for you

It's different for everyone. The impact of your stroke is unique to you, and you will have your own reasons for wanting to get active. You'll set your own goals and find your own motivation.

If you have difficulty walking, getting moving might be one of your main goals after a stroke. You might want to start doing more things independently, like shopping or travelling.

Some effects of stroke could make it harder to be active, like balance problems, shoulder pain, bladder problems or fatigue. But with support, you can find out what you can do. You'll find things you enjoy. Whatever your individual abilities are, you can try increasing your current level of activity. Even a small amount extra will make a difference.



### Coronavirus (COVID-19) and staying active

If you are more vulnerable to Covid-19 due to a health condition, you might want to check how an indoor fitness class or leisure centre stays Covid safe. Many fitness classes are offered online.



Try our online movement videos that you can tailor to your own level of fitness and mobility at [mystrokeguide.com/fitness-videos](https://mystrokeguide.com/fitness-videos).



# How to get started – and keep going!

## **Start slowly and build up**

Start slowly. Take it one step at a time, and don't do too much too soon. Plan in some time to rest between activities, or at certain times of day. If you have fatigue, rest is especially important. Set yourself an achievable goal. If you reach your goals, you're more likely to feel successful and keep going. See 'Setting your movement goals' later in this guide.

## **Find something you enjoy**

If you can find something you enjoy doing, it makes it so much easier to keep going.

Try different things, until you find something you love.

**"I hate swimming, but love the gym; I find running dull (especially treadmills) but enjoy cycling."**

Rich, stroke survivor



### **Plan it in your day**

If you're planning an activity, put it in your diary. That way it's already on your mind, and you're much more likely to do it. Why not tell someone what you are going to do, so they can ask you about it later? It might help you stick to your plan if you know someone is interested in what you are doing.

**"I work well with an activity on a set date and time."**

Mike, stroke survivor



### **Do it with other people**

Many people tell us that sharing their activity goals with other people can really help.

If you can find someone with similar goals, you can help and encourage each other stay motivated and celebrate your successes together. Some people say they enjoy doing things with people of a similar ability or level of fitness, as it makes them feel more motivated to keep going.

**"Going along to the group, I have met a lot of lovely people and have made some lovely friends."**

Sandra, stroke survivor





### Ways to share your activity goals

Tell friends and family you're planning to be more active. Ask them to encourage you by asking how you did each day or each week. They could help you record your activities on paper or using an app. They could do some activities with you such as chair-based exercises in the home, or going for a walk or run together.

Find support online. The Stroke Association's My Stroke Guide has online chat rooms where people share advice and stories.

Join a group, such as a post-stroke movement group offered by the Stroke Association in some areas of the UK. There may be post-stroke or cardiac rehabilitation classes available at local hospitals, and exercise on prescription from your GP.

### Ways of finding support

- Meeting other people who have had a stroke. You can share stories and tips, or do activities together. You might be able to meet others at a stroke club or group, or online.
- Joining local group activities such as group walks, exercise classes or a sport club such as golf or badminton.
- Friends and family can join in with activities, or encourage you to reach your goals. Ask your therapist or GP what support is available.

## If you stop, have another go!

Don't be put off if you can't keep going with an activity. You might run out of steam or need a change. You might just need to try a few different things before you find what suits you. See if you can find a way round any practical problems such as transport problems.



Sometimes a chat with a friend or therapist can help you find solutions. If you've lost motivation, just going back to an activity once can remind you how much you enjoy it and give you the boost you need.

**"...you may have to try a few things before you find your level, but it's important to stay committed to finding something."**

Rich, stroke survivor

# Setting your movement goals



## Set yourself realistic goals.

Make it specific and achievable. Rather than 'I want to get back to normal' you could choose 'I want to weed the garden'. Your goal should suit what you can do, and what you enjoy.

**"...doing functional things every day is as good as going to a gym."**

Paul, stroke survivor.



## Set a date to reach your goal.

Make the goal something you can achieve in a few days or weeks. If it's too difficult, or too far off in the future, it's hard to stay motivated.





### **Break it down into small steps.**

Think about the small steps you need to take to reach your goal. You could plan to do one step each day. Your first step could be to get to your back door. Another step could be practising using garden tools. Another step could be walking around the garden.

Challenge yourself, but keep things achievable. Taking those smaller steps will help you reach your overall goal in the end.



### **Record your progress and celebrate your success.**

Keep a note of the things you do, and when you reach a goal, celebrate! You can get friends and family involved in doing the steps towards each goal. They can talk with you about your activities, and join in with celebrating your successes.

You can use a notebook or diary to record what you do. You could also use an activity tracker or fitness app. And try the goal planner on our free online tool, **mystrokeguide.com**.

# Moving more at home

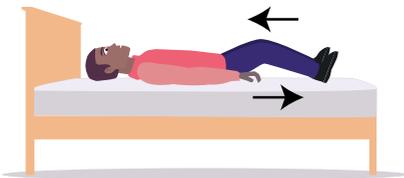
These are some ideas for movements to try at home.

Remember: Every stroke is different, so you might not be able to do all of these movements. Only do activities that are safe for you. If you're not sure, ask your therapist or GP for advice.

## On a bed

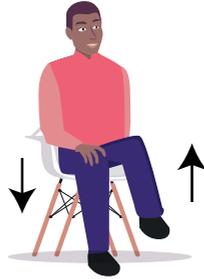


- Lying down with your knees bent, keep your feet and knees together and roll your knees slowly from side to side.



- Lying down, bend and straighten your legs in front of you along the bed.

### In a chair



- March your feet. You can do this while watching TV or reading.



- Seated gardening activities like planting a seed tray, making a hanging basket or weeding a raised bed.



- Sit to stand: start looking straight ahead with feet slightly apart. Stand up slowly, then sit down slowly. Why not do it in a break between TV programmes?

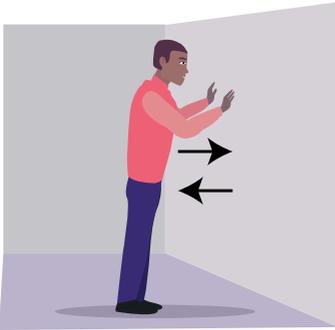


- Single leg lift: lift one leg, keeping it straight. Lower it slowly. Repeat with the other leg.

## Standing



- Marching on the spot.
- Knee lift: with a bent leg, raise the knee up in front of you. Lower it slowly. Repeat on the other leg. Stand next to a chair and hold on to it for balance if you need to. You can also do this while seated.



- Wall 'press-up': face the wall and take a small step back. Put your hands flat against the wall at shoulder height, fingers pointing up. Bend your elbows and lean towards the wall, keeping your body straight and feet flat on the ground. Push back to standing.



# Being active in daily life

You don't have to go to a gym: you can find some great ways to be active in everyday life. These activities aim to make your heart beat faster and make you feel warmer. If you do something more energetic or for longer you might feel a little out of breath but still be able to speak.



**Tip:** you don't have to carry on for a long time. A short burst of activity several times a day can have the same benefit as a longer session. This could mean two minutes, five minutes or 10 minutes at a time – have a go, and see what's right for you.

**"...when I exercise, I do have more energy."**

Mike, stroke survivor



**Tip:** if you want to push yourself a bit more, try to fit an extra activity into your day. Or you can do an activity for longer, or speed up and do it more quickly.

- Time yourself doing the vacuuming, and then beat your time another day. Put some music on while you're dusting to get you moving around the room.
- Gardening tasks like weeding, digging and planting can build strength, and improve skills using hands and fingers.
- Walking is a great way to get moving. You can walk in your home, or outdoors. Build up the distance at your own pace and it's something you can do with a friend or a dog. You can add walking into your day by getting off the bus early, or walking to the shops instead of driving. The NHS 'Active 10' app tracks all your walking on your phone, and helps you set goals. Visit [nhs.uk/better-health/get-active](https://www.nhs.uk/better-health/get-active).
- Climbing up stairs is a great way of getting your heart working, as well as strengthening muscles. When you are out, try taking the stairs instead of a lift. Go up and down stairs in your home a few times, or do step-ups on the bottom step.
- You can use a resistance band for developing strength in arms and legs. Ask a fitness instructor or physiotherapist for exercises you can do, or look on YouTube for videos.



**Tip:** use a fitness tracker on a watch or phone. They can measure the steps you take as well as heart rate and sleep.

**"I was already mobile, albeit using a walking frame, and decided to walk further and longer."**

James, stroke survivor

# Getting started with exercise

If you feel ready, you could look for some more structured exercise such as a workout, run or a group activity. Look for something that suits you. It could be something you do by yourself, or in a group.

You can do things like walking, running swimming or cycling by yourself or with someone else. Wheelchair users can take part in seated workouts, and look for adapted activities and sports. Gyms should be accessible to disabled people, and some offer adapted equipment. You can use a swimming pool to help build strength and stamina by doing squats and walking through the water.

Even if you prefer to exercise alone you might enjoy having some support and encouragement from family and friends. To get some support, you could post your progress on social media, or a friend can help you keep records of your exercise. The NHS 'Couch to 5K' app records your runs and lets you join an online community.



**Tip:** drink plenty of fluids a few hours before you start exercising to make sure you're well hydrated when you start, and take something to drink afterwards.



### **Specialist rehabilitation groups**

In some parts of the UK you can join a group for stroke survivors. The Stroke Association runs activity and fitness groups, and some health authorities provide groups for people with heart attacks, stroke or neurological problems. Ask your GP or stroke team if there is a local group you can join.

### **Dance and exercise groups**

Look for a group activity that's right for you. Activities like aqua aerobics, Zumba, tai chi, circuit training, yoga and pilates all offer something different. You can choose something energetic that gets your heart working or you can focus on flexibility and strength. Some groups use music, some go at a slower pace and some have a social side. And having to attend a class at a set time can motivate you to exercise.

If you want to join a group but you are not sure if you can complete a whole session, speak to the teacher in advance. They should be able to suggest ways to adjust the class to suit you, such as having some extra breaks to avoid fatigue. They might be able to adapt parts of the activity or give you alternatives.

### **Social activity groups**

There are other leisure activities you can do in a group such as environmental work, walking or cycling. The Stroke Association has information about accessible leisure activities, and you can go online to look for local groups or organisations.

## Getting back into sport

If you were very active or sporty before your stroke, you might want to get back to your old fitness levels as well as finding the same enjoyment from doing what you love. You may need to return slowly, to regain fitness and avoid injury after a break.

If you find that you can't go back to your usual activity, you might be able to carry on with sport in a new way. Think about what you love about your sport. Is it being in a team? Is it about challenging yourself? Is it a sense of speed or danger, or enjoying moving to music?

Look around at other activities that might offer the same things. Some sports have inclusive versions such as walking football, sailing, rugby and tandem cycling. You might be able to access sport with some help or equipment, such as running as part of a relay team, or with a sighted friend if you have sight loss.



Ask an occupational therapist or physiotherapist for advice on adapting equipment and finding new ways of doing things.

**"I have got stronger, found a sport I enjoy playing. It has given me my life back."**

Marta, stroke survivor



# What being active can do for you



## Staying healthy

Being active can help you stay healthy and feel good, and it can also reduce your risk of another stroke. Being active can:

- Lower your blood pressure.
- Help you manage diabetes.
- Reduce cholesterol.
- Strengthen your heart and improve your circulation.
- Reduce the risk of a blood clot.
- Help with weight loss.



## Fatigue

Being active can help with fatigue. You might need to plan in some extra rest time, but moving more can improve your energy levels, and help you sleep better. It can improve your fitness and muscle strength, which may also make you feel less tired. For more information visit [stroke.org.uk/fatigue](https://stroke.org.uk/fatigue).





### **Independence and recovery**

You can gain more independence through being active, because you are moving and using the parts of your body in a new way. You can practise walking, lifting things and using your hands. Repetition helps you get stronger and re-learn skills for essential tasks like dressing, cooking and travelling.



### **Wellbeing and confidence**

Moving your body helps your emotional wellbeing. Doing even a small amount more exercise can help reduce feelings of anxiety and stress. It can also help build your confidence about yourself if you start to feel good about reaching your goals, trying new things and meeting new people.



### **Pain**

Staying active and mobile can help with long-term pain by reducing muscle stiffness and improving wellbeing. Choose an activity that is safe for you – you may need to check with your physiotherapist or GP to make sure. Try smaller movements in a pain-free range, and rest if you need to. It's common to get sore muscles when you start off with a new exercise, but if it's a sharp pain or you are worried, stop and check with your fitness instructor, a GP or therapist.



# How can I be active if I have...

Practical tips for dealing with some of the effects of a stroke if you want to be more active.



## Emotional effects

Being active is known to be great for emotional wellbeing. But if you're experiencing anxiety or low mood, it can be hard to get started with something new. So have a look at our tips for getting motivated in this guide. If you're struggling with low mood or anxiety, ask your GP for help. For more information visit [stroke.org.uk/emotional-changes](https://stroke.org.uk/emotional-changes).



## Vision problems

If your eyes are very sensitive to light, wear sunglasses or a baseball cap to shade your eyes. If you have low vision or perceptual problems, good indoor lighting and a tidy, uncluttered space can help. If you are in a group activity, the instructor can support you by giving extra verbal descriptions and pointing out obstacles. They can provide some equipment like balls or bats in bright colours. You could do outdoor activities like walking or running alongside a friend. For more information visit [stroke.org.uk/vision-problems](https://stroke.org.uk/vision-problems).



## Continence problems

If you are worried about leaking urine (wee) or faeces (poo) while you're moving around, there are some practical things you can do.

Some kinds of exercise are more likely to cause leaks, such as high impact sports like netball and running. This can happen even for people who don't normally have incontinence. Lower-impact activities that might avoid leaks include walking, chair-based exercises, swimming and cycling.

You can still do your fitness activity, but go prepared. Use pads if you need to. Take a change of clothes, and washing kit. You could wear dark clothes to hide small leaks.

Drink water regularly to stay hydrated, which can help reduce urgency. Use the toilet just before you start.

Pelvic floor muscle exercises can help reduce leaks. They work for men as well as women. You need to do them regularly to build up muscle strength.

Get some more help and advice: your pharmacist can advise on products you can use. A GP can give advice or refer you to a specialist nurse. For more information visit **[stroke.org.uk/continence-problems](https://stroke.org.uk/continence-problems)**.



### **Weakness down one side and spasticity**

A stroke can cause weakness or paralysis in arms and legs. It can also lead to very stiff muscles, or spasticity. You can still be active, but do things at your own pace, using smaller movements you can manage. Relax or stretch if you need to. Using your unaffected side too much can sometimes lead to problems with the affected side. So get advice from a therapist if you need to.



### **Balance problems**

You can still be active even if your balance is a problem. A therapist or trained exercise coach should be able to give you advice on safe movements and how to improve your balance. You can do activities on a chair or a mat, or use machines if you go to a gym. If you are standing, hold onto a chair back or lean against a wall. Ask your GP to refer you for advice if you need some help with balance problems.



### **Fatigue**

You might feel too tired to be active, but regular exercise can actually help give you more energy and better sleep. Try a few different activities, and find out what you enjoy and what works for you. Start slowly, and build up over time, to avoid making the fatigue worse. Overall energy levels should improve, but you might need to build in time for some extra rests during and after activities.



# I'm worried that...

Some of the common concerns and fears people have about becoming more active.

## **I might have another stroke**

Sometimes people worry that being active could cause another stroke. But the opposite is true. Moving and being active is a great way to stay healthy and avoid another stroke. So unless your doctor tells you otherwise, moving and being active is safe, and it could make all the difference to your health and wellbeing.

## **I might get injured**

As long as you do things that you are capable of, you can move and be more active. Don't avoid being active because you're worried. If you have any health problems such as atrial fibrillation or diabetes, it's a good idea to speak to your GP before starting to become more active.

If you are not sure what you can do, look for some advice from a professional like a therapist or trained exercise coach. An occupational therapist can help you find new ways of doing things.

### **My blood pressure will go up**

If you have high blood pressure, physical activity can help to reduce it over time. When you do something that makes your heart beat faster, such as running, your blood pressure goes up, but goes back down when you rest. By exercising regularly, you actually make the heart stronger and more efficient. Over time your resting blood pressure can go down to a healthier level.



However, if you have very high blood pressure you should speak to your doctor before starting to be more active, to make sure it's safe for you. Ask your pharmacist if your medication could affect you during exercise.

### **I have several health problems**

If you have a number of health problems together like diabetes and a heart condition, and you're not sure what level of activity you can do, speak to your GP or stroke nurse.



# Where to get help and information

## From the Stroke Association

### Helpline

Our Helpline offers information and support for anyone affected by TIA and stroke. This includes friends and carers.

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

### Read our information

Get more information about stroke online at **stroke.org.uk**, or call the Helpline to ask for printed copies of our guides.

### My Stroke Guide

The Stroke Association's online tool My Stroke Guide gives you free access to trusted advice, information and support 24/7. My Stroke Guide connects you to our online community, to find out how others manage their recovery.

Log on to **mystrokeguide.com** today.

## Other sources of help and information

### Getting started with movement and activity

#### Love activity, hate exercise

Website: [csp.org.uk/activity](https://csp.org.uk/activity)

Great ideas for moving, being active and having fun.

#### This Girl can

Website: [thisgirlcan.co.uk](https://thisgirlcan.co.uk)

How you can feel more confident about your body by moving and being active. The advice is for anyone of any gender.

#### Walking

Ramblers Association (England, Scotland, Wales).

Online resources about walking outdoors with a health condition or disability [ramblers.org.uk/advice/walking-with-a-disability-or-health-issue](https://ramblers.org.uk/advice/walking-with-a-disability-or-health-issue)

Tel: 020 3961 3300

#### Walking for Health (England)

Website: [walkingforhealth.org.uk](https://walkingforhealth.org.uk)

Free weekly walks guided by trained volunteers. Visit the website to find a walk near you.

#### We are undefeatable

Website: [weareundefeatable.co.uk](https://weareundefeatable.co.uk)

Inspiring stories and practical resources to help you be more active when you have a health condition or disability.

## **Inclusive sports and activities**

### **Disability Sports NI**

Website: [dsni.co.uk](http://dsni.co.uk)

Tel: **028 9046 9925** (Belfast office)

### **Disability Sport Wales**

Website: [disabilitysportwales.com](http://disabilitysportwales.com)

Tel: **0300 300 3115**

### **Parasport activity finder**

Website: [parasport.org.uk/](http://parasport.org.uk/)

Look for inclusive sports and activities near you.

### **Scottish Disability Sport**

Website: [scottishdisabilitysport.com](http://scottishdisabilitysport.com)

### **Sportability (England)**

Website: [sportability.org.uk](http://sportability.org.uk)

Tel: **07305 047 533**

Email: [info@sportability.org.uk](mailto:info@sportability.org.uk)

## 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

This guide contains general information about stroke. But if you have a problem, you should get individual advice from a professional such as a GP or pharmacist. Our Helpline can also help you find support. We work very hard to give you the latest facts, but some things change. We don't control the information provided by other organisations or websites.

**When stroke strikes, part of your brain shuts down.** And so does a part of you. Life changes instantly and recovery is tough. But the brain can adapt. Our specialist support, research and campaigning are only possible with the courage and determination of the stroke community. With more donations and support from you, we can rebuild even more lives.

Donate or find out more at [stroke.org.uk](https://stroke.org.uk)

## Contact us

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We're here for you. Contact us for expert information and support by phone, email and online.

Stroke Helpline: **0303 3033 100**

From a textphone: **18001 0303 3033 100**

Email: [helpline@stroke.org.uk](mailto:helpline@stroke.org.uk)

Website: [stroke.org.uk](https://stroke.org.uk)

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Rebuilding lives after stroke



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