



# Movement and exercise after stroke

## Fact sheet

**A stroke can affect parts of the brain that control your arms and legs resulting in paralysis or weakness. It is important to understand that stroke affects the brain and that the problem is not primarily in the muscles. Although most improvement usually occurs in the first six months after a stroke, recovery may continue for several years.**

### Physiotherapy assessment

If you are having problems moving and balancing, it can be frustrating and sometimes devastating. Therefore it is important you receive a full mobility assessment.

Physiotherapists are specially trained to identify movement problems that may be caused by a stroke. They can provide therapy to help improve activities such as walking, keeping your balance and using your arm.

### Recovery

Recovery after stroke can be slow and it is difficult to predict the level of recovery that will occur. Generally most recovery occurs during the first six months but can continue for years after a stroke, especially if you keep active and use your affected arm or leg the best you can. The more you practice the more likely you are to stimulate your recovery.

### Changes after stroke

Difficulties moving after a stroke can be caused by:

- ❑ **Weakness** (paralysis) in leg and/or arm muscles.
- ❑ **Loss of sensation or feeling.** Sometimes there can be a loss of feeling in the skin or the joints themselves.
- ❑ **Poor coordination or balance** often as a result of weakness or loss of feeling.
- ❑ **Muscle or joint stiffness.** Muscles and joints easily become stiff if not used normally. Spasticity (increase in muscle tone) may also limit movement.
- ❑ **Shoulder pain or subluxation** (bones moving out of normal position) caused by weak shoulder muscles allowing the shoulder bone to move out of joint.
- ❑ **Lack of energy** (fatigue) If you have difficulty moving you will need to put more effort and energy into moving, which may lead to increased fatigue.

### Therapy

Movement problems affect each person differently. Your therapist will work with you to decide the best program to meet your personal needs and goals.

Different therapies may include:

- ❑ Practising tasks/activities that you have difficulty doing. This may include rolling over in bed, sitting or standing up, walking and using your hand or arm.
- ❑ Exercising to improve your strength, sensation (ability to sense or feel things), coordination, balance or fitness. Often this can be done as you practice normal activities such as standing or walking. Exercises that use electrical stimulation and other equipment (eg. treadmills) may also be used as part of your therapy to help improve your ability to move.
- ❑ Joining a fitness centre, club in the community, or exercise program at your local community health care centre to keep yourself fit. Often after a stroke, fitness levels drop, so it is important to keep yourself as active as possible in the long-term. Talk to your therapist about whether this is right for you.
- ❑ Stretching or supporting your muscles to reduce their stiffness or pain. Often when muscles are not being used normally they get stiff and can also become painful. It is important to keep the muscles flexible.
- ❑ Teaching you how to safely walk which may include the help of certain aids like a frame or stick. Never use a frame or walking



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stick without getting advice first. Some people should avoid using these supports early after a stroke as it changes the way muscles learn to move again and limits recovery. Your therapist will help you work out if you need them.

- ❑ Limiting the use of your good arm to encourage use of the affected arm. Research has found that by forcing you to use your affected arm, you can improve the extent of recovery. It is important to seek the advice of your therapist first.

## What can you do?

Research has found that **the more you do the better you get**. You should try and do as much as you can during therapy time. Your physiotherapist should advise what is best for you to do by yourself or with the help of family or friends. You may also need to check with your doctor in case you have other medical conditions (eg. heart condition), which may limit the amount of activity you do.

Ongoing exercise will help maintain the movement you regain after a stroke and keep you as healthy as possible. You may consider joining a local gym or finding an exercise group (eg. walking group). Remember exercising helps with your movement as well as reducing your risk of further strokes. Exercise is also known to help people feel more positive and have more energy.

## More information

If you or your family have any questions you should ask your Physiotherapist.

**Note:** This fact sheet is number 8 in a series. For a complete list of fact sheets, visit [www.strokefoundation.com.au](http://www.strokefoundation.com.au)

