



KEEPING YOUR LOVED ONE HEALTHY

Exercise After Stroke

Physical activity or exercise can be any activity that gets the body moving. This includes things like walking and dancing. It can even include household chores like sweeping.

Why Is It Important?

Exercise is good for both the mind and body. It can help your loved one get back strength that was lost due to stroke. It can make muscles more flexible. This will help improve how your loved one moves.

Physical exercise is important in reducing the risk of your loved one having another stroke. Stroke guidelines suggest that the survivor gets 20 to 60 minutes of aerobic exercise three to seven days per week. To make it easier, the exercise can be broken into smaller times. Walking for 10-15 minutes several times a day is a good way to get aerobic exercise.

Physical benefits of exercise:

- Improves energy level
- Makes bones and muscles stronger
- Lowers blood pressure
- Helps improve sleep
- Improves flexibility
- Reduces risk of falls
- Lowers chance of another stroke

Mental benefits of exercise:

- Reduces stress
- Lowers feelings of depression and anxiety
- Improves self-worth
- Promotes independence

What Do You Need to Know?

Stroke can reduce your loved one's ability to exercise. If they are depressed, the motivation to exercise may be lowered. With decreased physical activity, muscles become weaker. The chances of another stroke or other health problem will increase.

It is important for your loved one to get regular exercise. Most survivors are able to do some form of exercise after their stroke. The type of exercise your loved one can do depends on the disability. The key is to stay as physically active as possible. Talk to your healthcare team before your loved one starts an exercise program.

What Are the Different Types of Exercise?

Aerobic Exercise

- Includes walking, dancing or riding a bike
- Helps to lower blood pressure and maintain a healthy body weight
- Low-impact exercises like swimming help protect the joints

Do 30 minutes of moderate exercise 5 days a week or 20 minutes of intense exercise 3 days a week.

Strengthening Exercise

- Includes conditioning exercises, like sit-ups and push-ups
- Includes using balance balls and weights
- Helps to make muscles stronger

Do muscle strengthening exercises at least two times a week.

Flexibility Exercise

- Includes stretching and yoga
- Helps to keep joints flexible
- Lowers chance of injury

Do exercises that increase flexibility at least 2 times a week.

Red Flag: Signs to Stop Exercising

Stop exercising right away and contact your healthcare team if your loved one:

- Feels dizzy
- Has trouble breathing
- Has pain (especially chest pain)

How Do You Get Your Loved One to Exercise?

- Help your loved one choose activities they enjoy doing. Walking the dog or gardening can be a fun way to get exercise.
- Join in on the exercise. You can improve your health together.
- Be a cheerleader for your loved one. Even small progress deserves praise.
- Keep an activity journal. Seeing the progress made can help motivate your loved one to continue. You can use the activity journal on My Health@Vet. Go to <http://www.myhealth.va.gov>. You must be registered to use this feature.
- Look into adaptive recreation if your loved one has a disability. Adaptive recreation allows people with disabilities to get involved in sports or other fitness activities. The Adaptive Resource Information Center can help you find activities in your area. The “More Resources” section at the end of this fact sheet has contact information.

Helpful Tips

- Have your loved one start slowly. Don't overdo it.
- Remember to have them warm up and cool down when exercising.
- Make sure your loved one drinks plenty of water before, during and after exercise.

Remember

- Exercise is important in reducing the risk of your loved one having another stroke. It is good for both the mind and body.
- Talk to your healthcare team before your loved one starts exercising.
- Exercise with your loved one and improve your health too.

More Resources

The following resources contain internet links. The location of internet pages can change. Therefore the links provided may not always work. For the most current version of this list, go to <http://www.rorc.research.va.gov/rescue/resources>. This page will be updated frequently.

Link Disclaimer: Links to information and Web sites outside of the Department of Veterans Affairs do not indicate an endorsement of products or services offered by the sites. In addition, these sites may have privacy and security policies that are inconsistent with those of VA.

MOVE! Weight Management Program

Web: <http://www.move.va.gov>

The Move! Weight Management Program is a VA diet and exercise program to help Veterans improve their health. To make the program more tailored to your needs, take the MOVE! 23 questionnaire.

There are also handouts on nutrition, exercise and emotional health. Information is also available in Spanish. For a list of handouts, go to this link:

<http://www.move.va.gov/handouts.asp?all>

My HealthVet

Web: <http://www.myhealth.va.gov>

My HealthVet has guides on eating well, exercising and taking medicine safely. It has tools to help track your progress and additional resources.

- Go to: <http://www.myhealth.va.gov>
- Click on the button that says “Enter Here”
- Click on “Research Health” on the top bar, then “Healthy Living Centers”

National Stroke Association

Web: <http://www.stroke.org>

Phone: 1-800-787-6537

The National Stroke Association has a guide called “HOPE: The Stroke Recovery Guide.” Chapter four is on movement and exercise. This chapter gives an exercise program for stroke survivors who are affected either mildly or moderately by stroke. View the guide at this link: <http://www.stroke.org/site/PageServer?pagename=HOPE>

Stroke Association (United Kingdom)

Web: <http://www.stroke.org.uk>

The United Kingdom Stroke Association has tips on healthy eating and exercise. Go to this link:

http://www.stroke.org.uk/campaigns/current_campaigns/weigh_up_your_risk_of_stroke

Note: This Web site offers helpful information for caregivers, but some references may not apply to caregivers in the United States.

For more information on stroke caregiving, visit the RESCUE home page:

<http://www.rorc.research.va.gov/rescue>

References: National Stroke Association. (2008). *Hope: The Stroke Recovery Guide*. Retrieved August 19, 2008, from: http://www.stroke.org/site/PageServer?pagename=SS_MAG_ma2007_mobility; American Council on Exercise. (2008). *Fit Facts*. Retrieved October 8, 2008, from: <http://www.acefitness.org/fitfacts/default.aspx>; Caswell, J. (2008) *Getting Active, Staying Active: Even a little physical activity has far-reaching benefits for stroke survivors*. Stroke Connection, pg 15-18.; About.com. (2008). Retrieved October 8, 2008, from: <http://exercise.about.com>; My HealthVet. (2008). *Healthy Living Centers*. Retrieved October 8, 2008, from: <http://www.myhealth.va.gov>; Morantz, C. and Torrey, B. (July 15, 2004). Practice Guideline Briefs: Recommendations for exercise after stroke. *American Family Physician*. Retrieved November 12, 2008, from: <http://www.aafp.org/afp/20040715/practice.html>; Nelson, Miriam E., W. Jack Rejeski, Steven N. Blair, Pamela W. Duncan, James O. Judge, Abby C. King, Carol A. Macera, and Carmen Castaneda-Sceppa. (2007). "Physical Activity and Public Health in Older Adults." *Circulation*. 116; 1094-1105. Retrieved November 16, 2008, from <http://circ.ahajournals.org/cgi/content/full/109/16/2031>.



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