

Stroke recovery



Exercise After Stroke

Physical activity and exercise are important for stroke recovery. The best type of exercise for you will depend on how your stroke has affected you. Loss of physical ability after a stroke is called functional limitation. This can range from no functional limitation to severe functional limitation. Work with your stroke care providers to find a safe exercise program that fits your needs and ability. This will depend on your strengths, limitations, fitness, and interests.

Questions to ask your health care provider

Before you begin any exercise, ask your health care providers:

- What exercises are safe for you.
- How many times you should repeat each exercise.
- How often you should do each exercise.

What are the benefits of exercise after a stroke?

Exercise after a stroke has many benefits. It can:

- Improve your heart and lung function.
- Reduce fat in your blood (*cholesterol*).
- Lower your blood pressure.
- Improve your strength, endurance, balance, and coordination.
- Give you confidence in your ability to be independent.

- Reduce your risk for depression and anxiety.
- Reduce the risk of another stroke.
- Improve your quality of life.

What exercises can improve my strength and balance?

Strengthening exercises improve muscle strength and endurance. As your muscles become stronger, you may be able to move better and become more active and independent. You can use weights and elastic bands to do these exercises.

- **To strengthen your shoulder blade muscles:** Lie on your back with your arms at your sides. Raise one arm toward the ceiling, keeping your elbow stiff. Try to raise your shoulder blade off the floor and hold that position for about 5 seconds.
- **To strengthen your shoulder and arm muscles:** Lie on your back and hold one end of an elastic exercise band in each hand at your waist. The band will provide light resistance. Move one hand to your hip area, and raise your other arm sideways and upward until your hand is above your head. Keep your elbow as straight as you can.
- **To strengthen your upper arm muscles:** Lie on your back with your arms at your sides. Place a rolled towel under one elbow. Lift up your hand toward your shoulder. Keep your elbow flat against the towel.

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- **To improve hip balance and control:** Lie flat on your back. Keep one leg flat on the floor, and bend the other leg at the knee. Lift the foot of the bent leg off the ground and cross the foot over to rest on the outside of the straight leg. Cross the foot back and forth several times.
- **To improve hip strength and movement:** Lie on your back with your knees bent and your feet flat on the floor. Lift your hips off the floor as high as you can. Hold the position for about 5 seconds. Lower your hips back to the floor.
- **To improve hip and knee control:** Lie on your back with your knees bent and your feet flat on the floor. Slide your leg out straight by sliding the tip of your heel along the floor. Keeping your heel on the floor, slide your leg back into the bent position.
- **To improve knee control for walking:** Lie on your side with your knees slightly bent. Straighten the leg that is not on the floor. After the leg is straight, bend it at the knee toward your buttocks as far back as you can.
- **To improve balance while walking:** Get down on the floor on your hands and knees. Distribute your weight evenly on both arms and legs. Rock back in a diagonal direction, shifting your weight back toward your right foot. Then rock forward toward your left hand. Switch sides and repeat.
- **To improve balance and knee control:** Stand up straight and use the edge of a table or chair for support. Take the weight off one leg by bending the knee.

With your weight on the other leg, bend and straighten the knee. Repeat several times, bending and straightening your knee with most of your weight on your leg.

- **To improve balance and hip strength:** Stand facing a chair or table for support with your legs slightly apart. Shift your weight to one leg while you lift the other leg sideways off the floor, keeping your knee as straight as possible. Shift your weight to the other side and lift the other leg off the floor.

How much aerobic exercise should I get?

Aerobic exercise is activity that increases your heart rate and breathing rate, which in turn pumps more blood and oxygen throughout your body. Aerobic exercise can:

- Increase your energy and stamina.
- Strengthen your heart and lungs.
- Lower your blood pressure.

For most people, the recommendation is 30–45 minutes of aerobic activity on most days of the week. If you are recovering from a stroke:

- Ask your stroke care provider how much aerobic activity is safe for you.
- Start any exercise slowly and gradually increase your activity over time.

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Examples of aerobic exercise

- Walking indoors or outdoors.
- Walking on a treadmill.
- Biking.
- Riding a stationary bike.
- Swimming.
- Exercising or walking in a pool.
- Doing housework or yard work.
- Dancing.
- Taking a yoga or tai chi class.

Follow these instructions at home:

- Practice your exercises with your stroke care provider before starting them.
- When you start exercising, have someone with you who can help if you get tired, lose your balance, or have any trouble.
- Wear loose, comfortable clothing and supportive shoes with non-skid soles.
- Drink plenty of water while you exercise.
- Stop exercising if you feel weak, have trouble breathing, or have pain. Check with your stroke care provider before starting to exercise again.
- **Do not** exercise if you feel tired or unwell.
- **Do not** exercise in very cold or warm temperatures.

Summary

- Physical activity and exercise are important for stroke recovery.
- Exercise after a stroke has many benefits that include reducing the risk of another

stroke, improving strength and balance, and improving your quality of life.

- Work with your stroke care provider to find a safe exercise program that will fit your needs and abilities.

This information is not intended to replace advice given to you by your health care provider. Make sure you discuss any questions you have with your health care provider.

Get help right away if you have:

- ▲ A sudden, severe headache with no known cause
- ▲ Nausea or vomiting occurring with another symptom
- ▲ Sudden weakness or numbness of your face, arm or leg, especially on one side of your body
- ▲ Sudden trouble walking or difficulty moving your arms or legs
- ▲ Sudden confusion

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