



## Stroke/Brain Attack: Exercise after Stroke

Starting or going back to regular exercise may seem challenging or scary as you recover from your stroke. But there are many benefits of regular exercise. Whether you take part in a formal class or make exercise part of your daily routine, all activity adds up to a healthier heart and body. Although you may be limited from doing some forms of exercise, it's important to find ways to stay as active as possible. *Exercise may be the best medicine you can get without a prescription.*

### What are the benefits of regular exercise?

- **Reduces your risk of having a second stroke.**  
A recent study showed that people who exercise 5 or more times per week have a reduced stroke risk.
- Improves heart and lung health, which reduces your risk of heart problems such as a heart attack
- Helps you lose weight or keep a desirable weight
- Helps to control blood cholesterol, blood pressure and diabetes
- Reduces stress
- Gives you more energy
- Improves mental outlook
- Relieves depression
- Increases bone density
- Improves your ability to sleep
- Improves your ability to return to community activities, as well as leisure and work activities

### How do I start a program?

- **Start by talking to your health care provider, such as your doctor or therapist.**
- Ask your doctor to see a specialist in exercise to set up a program. Physical and occupational therapists that work in stroke rehabilitation may be able to suggest activities that match your fitness level. Or, you may be referred to a cardiac rehab specialist to monitor your heart during activity.
- Find an activity that you enjoy. Do you like being outside? Then perhaps a walking program is your activity. Do you like to be around other people? Perhaps a group class at the local gym or YMCA is your activity. Be creative.
- Start slow and give your body time to adjust.

### What type of exercise should I do?

You can do any type of exercise you enjoy, as long as you can physically handle it. Even moderate exercise, such as walking or gardening, can provide health benefits. Here are simple ways to start:

- Do small amounts of activity throughout the day.
- Then add 5 to 10 more minutes of activity to your current level of activity. Do this for two weeks. Then add a few minutes more. Over time, build up to a total of 30 minutes of activity each day.

**If you are unable to walk:** Perform sit-to-stand 5 to 10 times with help if needed. Try to increase the amount of time you can stand, using a countertop for balance. If you are able to stand, stand and wash the dishes or fold laundry. Try a sitting video exercise class, such as "Sit and Be Fit." Push yourself in a wheelchair for a set distance.

**If you can walk safely in your household:** Perform sit to stand 5 to 10 times in a row. Begin a walking program in the home, specifically counting how far you walked. Take the stairs. Gradually increase the time you spend doing home activities, such as cooking or light cleaning. Try a stationary bike for either the arms or legs. Think about taking a class, such as water aerobics.

**If you can walk safely in your household and in the community:** Begin a walking program. Take the stairs. Play sports, either something familiar or try something new. Think about joining a gym to take classes, such as water aerobics or Tai Chi, or try the gym equipment, like a treadmill.

- Exercise does not have to mean going to a gym. You can exercise anywhere and do almost anything as long as you challenge yourself.

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## Once I start, how do I stay motivated?

- Mix it up. Vary your activities.
- Surround yourself with supportive people. Invite family or friends to participate with you regularly or occasionally. Talk to other stroke survivors, such as at a stroke support group, about their strategies for staying motivated.
- Find a convenient time and place to exercise. Try to make it a habit, but be flexible.
- Remember – it takes time to feel a difference from exercise. You probably won't feel stronger or have more energy immediately. Give yourself a couple of weeks.
- Remember – some days will be easier than others. Even professional athletes have a bad day.
- Use music to keep you entertained and motivated while you do home exercises.
- Decide what kind of support you need. Do you want others to remind you to exercise? Ask about your progress? Participate with you regularly or occasionally? Allow you time to exercise by yourself?
- If you are having a hard time staying motivated, talk to your doctor. Depression can be common after stroke and can affect your motivation level, but it can be treated.
- Keep an activity log. Reward yourself at special milestones, such as three weeks without missing a day.
- Join a health and fitness club. A good fitness center should have qualified trainers who can help you find the best exercises for reaching your specific goals.
- Most important ... *have fun!*

## How often should I exercise?

- Aim for **at least 30 minutes of moderate physical activity on most days of the week.**
- After a stroke, it may take you a long time to be able to finish 30 minutes. That is OK. Take your time. Any activity you do is helpful as long as you are challenging yourself.
- You don't have to do 30 minutes all at once. For example, start by doing 10 minutes in the morning, 10 minutes in the afternoon, and 10 minutes after dinner. Then, as you get stronger, you will be able to work up to 30 minutes or more at a time.

## General guidelines for exercise

- Warm-up. A warm-up increases your heart rate and body temperature, preparing your heart for activity. A warm-up could include stretching, and usually takes 3 to 5 minutes.
- Cool-down. A cool-down allows blood to keep moving rather than being trapped in the muscles. Keep moving during the cool-down.
- Dress comfortably and wear good shoes.
- Use common sense. On warm or humid days, reduce your speed and distance as needed. Exercise during the coolest part of the day. Drink fluids. Avoid exercising outside if the temperature is below 20° F with or without the wind-chill factor. Exercise indoors during ozone alert days.
- Some medications will affect your body's response to exercise. Check with your doctor if you have concerns.



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### How hard should I exercise?

- One way to measure how hard to exercise is to use a rating scale for how you feel, like the one shown here.
- In general, you want to exercise at a “moderate” to “somewhat hard” level using this scale.
- Focus on increasing your time first, and then increase your pace.
- If you can’t talk because you are breathing too hard, then you are probably exercising too hard.

Rating Scale	
0	No effort
0.5	Very, very easy
1	Very easy
2	Easy
3	<b>Moderate</b>
4	<b>Somewhat hard</b>
5	Hard
6	
7	Very hard
8	
9	Very, very hard
10	Maximal

### What if I stop exercising for a while?

Almost everyone will have times when they don’t exercise. When you start up again, you may notice it is harder to do the same activities. But don’t worry. Just start up again slowly and for shorter duration, and you will build your strength up again.

### Is there anytime I should not do exercise?

**Stop exercise if you feel these symptoms and report immediately to your doctor:**

- Lightheadedness
- Dizziness
- Severe shortness of breath
- Chest pain or pressure
- Discomfort in one or both arms, the back, neck, jaw or stomach

### Call your doctor within 24 hours if you have:

- Unexpected shortness of breath or an increase in shortness of breath
- Sudden swelling in ankles, feet or lower legs
- Prolonged fatigue or exhaustion unrelieved with rest
- Episodes of pounding or irregular heartbeat
- Joint or muscle pain that does not get better with rest and ice

### Resource Websites

[www.ncpad.org](http://www.ncpad.org)

National Center on Physical Activity and Disability

[www.stroke.org](http://www.stroke.org)

National Stroke Association

[www.strokeassociation.org](http://www.strokeassociation.org)

American Stroke Association

[www.AuroraHealthCare.org](http://www.AuroraHealthCare.org)

Aurora Health Care’s Web site

### Important points to remember

- These are general guidelines. Talk to your health care provider if you have questions or need more information.
- Be patient, take it slow and have fun.

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