

After a Stroke: Getting Ready to Drive Again



Reclaiming the driver's seat after a stroke can be a daunting prospect. The good news? With support, guidance, and some adaptations, you can still travel the road ahead with confidence.

Reevaluate and relearn

It may be hard, but the best place to start is having an honest conversation with yourself. How have your physical abilities changed? What about your thinking skills? This exercise is about recognizing areas where you might need extra help or training.

Talk to your healthcare team about wanting to drive again. Sometimes stroke survivors are unaware of the effects the stroke has on driving skills. You may feel it's safe to drive when it isn't. Your team can evaluate problem-solving abilities, reflexes, vision, memory, and visual-spatial skills. Each of these areas is critical to safe driving. Certain post-stroke medicines, such as those for pain or seizures, can also make driving unsafe.

In some places, healthcare providers are required to tell local driving authorities about strokes and provide written documentation that you are safe to drive. Ask your provider what the rules are where you live or contact your state DMV and ask for the office of driver safety.

Choose your rehab co-pilot

You don't have to navigate this road alone. Many rehabilitation centers offer driving programs designed for people recovering from medical events like strokes. These programs tailor driving lessons to address common post-stroke challenges like:

- Hand-eye coordination
- Reaction and concentration time
- Spatial awareness
- Ability to gather, interpret, remember, and respond quickly to information

Plus, the expert instructors will be able to assess your abilities in real-time situations.

Put safety first

As you get behind the wheel again, always prioritize safety. Keep these tips in mind:

- **Don't drive alone.** On your first driving trips, have a trusted person go with you. This person can give you honest feedback on your skills and take over if you find that you're not quite ready to drive yet.
- **Practice in a controlled environment.** Before hitting busy roads, try driving in empty parking lots or less crowded areas to get the feel of things.
- **Avoid distractions.** Keep the radio off. Turn off your phone and dashboard navigator. Don't eat or drink while driving. Also, ask passengers to turn off phone alerts and be quiet during your first few drives.
- **Know when to pull over.** Driving after a stroke can present both physical and emotional challenges. If you ever feel overwhelmed or unsure, it's perfectly fine to pull over safely and take a moment to regroup.
- **Make modifications.** You might need vehicle modifications after a stroke. It could be as simple as adding larger mirrors or as complex as adapting the car controls. A rehab specialist can help decide what will be helpful for you.

If you need help with the costs of car modifications, contact your car's manufacturer. Or try your car insurance company. They will sometimes help pay for these changes.

Celebrate milestones

Each step forward is part of your journey back to independence. Remember to:

- **Acknowledge small victories.** Even short trips to the grocery store are something to be proud of.
- **Record your progress.** Keeping notes on your driving experiences may feel silly, but it can be pretty insightful. You'll see how far you've come. And you may notice areas that still need work.
- **Stay patient and positive.** It's OK if this process feels slow. The goal is not just to drive, but to drive safely and confidently.

Having a stroke changes your life in many ways, including how you drive. But with the right help and support, you can make the changes you need to get back on the road again.

What if I can't drive after a stroke?

Not being able to drive can make life hard, especially if you live in a rural area. This change in your way of life can lead to emotional reactions such as grief and sadness. Talk to your healthcare team and family about how you feel so that adequate support can be provided. They can help you plan different ways to get around and get things done.

If it's unsafe for you to drive and your community has public transportation, there are resources to help you get around. Many communities have voucher or volunteer-based community transportation programs. Contact the National Aging and Disability Transportation Center (nadtc.org) and search by your location to see what's available in your area.

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