

Getting **active** after a stroke



Why move more?

After a stroke, starting to be more active can be a massive boost to your recovery and your confidence. Almost anyone can find a way to add movement into their daily life. You can be active around your home or find an exercise class you enjoy.

Being more active can:

- Help you to stay healthy and feel good.
- Improve your balance and muscle strength.
- Reduce fatigue and lessen pain.
- Improve your mood.
- Build up stamina.
- Reduce the chance of another stroke.

Whether your stroke was recent or many years ago, moving more can make a difference to your wellbeing.

People sometimes tell us they have worries or questions about exercising after a stroke. If you're not sure which activities are safe for you because of a disability or a health condition, ask your GP or therapist for advice. Physiotherapists and occupational therapists can help you work out new ways of doing things.

If you need help finding support, you can call the Stroke Support Helpline on **0303 3033 100**.



Find what works for you

Stroke is different for everyone. The impact of your stroke is unique to you, and you will have your own reasons for wanting to get active. You can set your own goals to help you get motivated.

Some effects of stroke could make it harder to be active, like fatigue or problems with your balance, mobility or bladder. But with support, you can find out what you can do and find things you enjoy.

Whatever your individual abilities are, you can try increasing your current level of activity. Even a small amount extra will make a difference. Aim to be active in some way each day and try to minimise time spent sitting down for long periods. There are ideas for moving more at home on page 16.



You can find our movement videos for stroke survivors that you can tailor to your own level of fitness and mobility at stroke.org.uk/stroke/life-after/exercise



How to get started – and keep going!

Start slowly and build up

Start slowly. Take it one step at a time, and do not do too much too soon. Plan in some time to rest between activities, or at certain times of day. If you have fatigue, rest is especially important. Set yourself an achievable goal. If you reach your goals, you're more likely to feel successful and keep going. See 'Setting your movement goals' on page 13.

Find something you enjoy

Try different things. If you can find something you enjoy doing, it makes it so much easier to keep going. For example, you could try doing chair-based exercises or walking while listening to music, to make it more enjoyable. See page 17.

'You can start with small things, like little swaps and getting outside. It might be having a simple movement plan or learning to manage your stress.'

Olivia, stroke survivor



If you were active before stroke

If you were physically active before your stroke, you might find it frustrating if you cannot return to doing your favourite exercise or sport in the same way you used to.

Many people who were active before their stroke tell us they returned to some form of physical activity, even if it's sometimes at a different level than before.

Think about ways to adapt an activity you enjoy. For example, rather than running to hit a target, you could choose an interesting route and use your run to connect with the outdoors. See page 25 for more information on returning to exercise and sport.



Plan an activity in your day

If you're planning an activity, put it in your diary or phone calendar. That way, you're much more likely to do it. Why not tell someone what you're going to do, so they can ask you about it later? It might help you stick to your plan if you know someone is interested.



Do it with other people

Many people tell us sharing their activity goals with others can really help, especially if you lack the confidence or motivation to get started.

If you can find someone with similar goals, you can encourage each other and celebrate your successes together. Some people enjoy doing things with people of a similar ability or level of fitness, as it makes them feel more motivated to keep going and helps build their confidence.

See 'Other sources of help and information' on page 37 to help you find groups which run inclusive activities near you.



Share your activity goals

Tell friends and family you're planning to be more active. Ask them to encourage you by asking how you did each day or each week. They could help you record your activities on paper or using an app. They could do some activities with you, such as chair-based exercises at home or going for a walk or run together.

You can also find support via the Stroke Association website. Our Online Community is a forum where stroke survivors can share tips and stories about getting active. Visit onlinecommunity.stroke.org.uk

Get advice

If you've not exercised for some time, or you have medical conditions or concerns, talk to your doctor or therapist first.



Ways to find support

- Meet other people who have had a stroke. You could attend a local support group or join our Online Activities group exercise sessions via Zoom. Find out more at stroke.org.uk/support or call our Stroke Support Helpline.
- Look for local group activities such as group walks, exercise classes or a sports club, such as golf or badminton.
- In some areas, there may be schemes to provide subsidised access to gyms or exercise programmes for people with certain health conditions. Ask at your GP surgery.

If you stop, have another go!



Do not be put off if you cannot keep going with an activity. You might lose enthusiasm or need a change. You may just need to try a few different things before you find what suits you. See if you can find a way round any practical issues, such as transport problems.

Sometimes a chat with a friend or therapist can help you find solutions. If you've lost motivation, just going back to an activity once can remind you how much you enjoy it and give you the boost you need. Bringing a friend along for support might help.

'I joined my local Park Run as a motivation to help with my walking. Exactly a year to the date of joining, I ran my first 5K. I am so proud of this achievement!'

Sarah, stroke survivor



Setting your movement goals



Set yourself realistic goals

Make it specific and achievable. Rather than 'I want to get back to normal', you could choose 'I want to weed the garden'. Your goal should suit what you can do and what you enjoy.



Set a date to reach your goal

Make the goal something you can achieve in a few days or weeks. If it's too difficult, or too far off in the future, it can be hard to stay motivated.

'I have found yoga and meditation helps, as does setting myself goals.'

Ruth, stroke survivor



Break it down into small steps

Think about the small steps you need to take to reach your goal. You could plan to do one step each day. Your first step could be to get to your back door. Another step could be practising using garden tools. Another step could be walking around the garden.

Challenge yourself but keep things achievable. Taking those smaller steps will help you reach your overall goal in the end.



Record your progress and celebrate your success

Keep a note of the things you do, and when you reach a goal, celebrate! You can get friends and family involved in doing the steps towards each goal. They can talk with you about your activities and join in with celebrating your successes.

You can use a notebook or diary to record what you do, or use an activity tracker or fitness app on a smartphone or smartwatch.



For more tips on setting goals and a downloadable goal planner, see stroke.org.uk/stroke/recovery/goals

Moving more at home

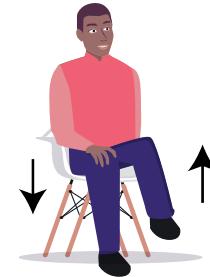
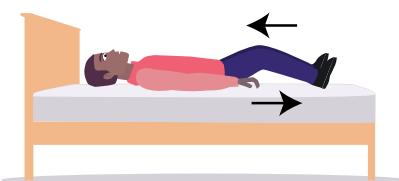
These are some ideas for movements to try at home.

Remember: Every stroke is different, so you might not be able to do all these movements. Only do activities that are safe for you. If you're not sure, ask your therapist or GP for advice.

On a bed



- Lying down with your knees bent, keep your feet and knees together and roll your knees slowly from side to side.
- Lying down, bend and straighten your legs in front of you along the bed.



In a chair



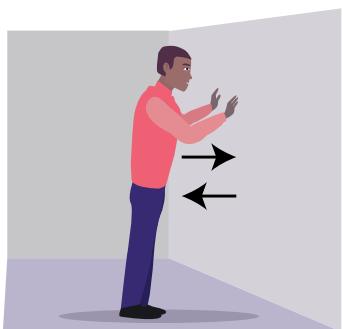
- March your feet. You can do this while watching TV or reading.
- Sit to stand: start looking straight ahead with feet slightly apart. Stand up slowly, then sit down slowly. Why not do it in a break between TV programmes?



- Single leg lift: lift one leg, keeping it straight. Lower it slowly. Repeat with the other leg.



- Seated gardening activities like planting a seed tray, making a hanging basket or weeding a raised bed.



Standing

- March on the spot.
- Knee lift: with a bent leg, raise the knee up in front of you. Lower it slowly. Repeat on the other leg. Stand next to a chair and hold onto it for balance if you need to. You can also do this while seated.
- Wall 'press-up': face the wall and take a small step back. Put your hands flat against the wall at shoulder height, fingers pointing up. Bend your elbows and lean towards the wall, keeping your body straight and feet flat on the ground. Push back to standing.



Being active in daily life

You can find some great ways to be active in everyday life and to build up your physical activity levels without joining a gym. These activities aim to make your heart beat faster and make you feel warmer. If you do something more energetic or for longer, you might feel a little out of breath but still be able to speak.



Tip: You do not have to carry on for a long time. A short burst of activity several times a day can be beneficial. This could mean two minutes, five minutes or 10 minutes at a time. Have a go and see what's right for you. Aim to make it part of your regular routine and build it up gradually.



Tip: Use a fitness tracker on a smartwatch or phone. They can measure the steps you take, as well as your heart rate.

- Put music on while you're dusting at home, to get you moving around the room.
- Gardening tasks like weeding, digging and planting can build muscle strength and improve skills using hands and fingers.
- Walking is a great way to get moving. You can walk in your home or outdoors. Build up the distance at your own pace. Add walking into your day by getting off the bus a stop early or walking to the shops instead of driving. The NHS Active 10 app tracks all your walking on your phone and helps you set goals. Visit nhs.uk/better-health/get-active
- Climbing stairs is a great way of getting your heart working, as well as strengthening muscles and providing some weight-bearing exercise which is important for your bones. When you're out, try taking the stairs instead of a lift. Go up and down stairs in your home a few times every day or do step-ups on the bottom step.
- The NHS website has more information on exercise for wheelchair users and people with limited mobility at nhs.uk/live-well/exercise

'The physical aspects are the bits I had an influence over: I could change those. I'm doing more exercise, I've got a dog and have become much more active.'

David, stroke survivor

Getting started with exercise

If you feel ready, you could look for some more structured exercise, such as a workout, run or a group activity. Look for something that suits you. It could be something you do by yourself or in a group.

Even if you prefer to exercise alone, you might enjoy having some support and encouragement from family and friends. You can do things like walking, running, swimming or cycling by yourself or with someone else. Wheelchair users can take part in seated workouts and look for adapted activities and sports. Gyms should be accessible to disabled people and some offer adapted equipment.

You can use a swimming pool to help build strength and stamina by doing squats and walking through the water. Swim England also has information on swimming after stroke. See 'Other sources of help and information' on page 38.



Tip: The NHS website has information on different types of exercise and physical activity guidelines at [nhs.uk/live-well/exercise](https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise)



Specialist rehabilitation groups

The Stroke Association offers activity and fitness groups, and some local health authorities have groups for people who have had heart attacks, stroke or neurological problems. Ask your stroke team or your GP surgery if there is a local group you can join.

Exercise groups and classes

Look for a group activity that's right for you. Some groups use music, some go at a slower pace and some have a social side. Attending a class at a set time can motivate you to exercise.

Different types of exercise have different benefits for your body. Activities like aqua aerobics, Zumba and circuit training get your heart working and can help improve your cardiovascular fitness. Classes like yoga, tai chi and Pilates can help with muscle strength, flexibility and balance.

If you want to join a group but you're not sure if it's right for you, speak to the teacher in advance. They may be able to suggest ways to adjust the class to suit you, such as having some extra breaks to avoid fatigue. They might be able to adapt parts of the activity or give you alternatives.

Social activity groups

There are other leisure activities you can do in a group such as outdoor environmental work, walking or cycling. Go online to look for local groups or organisations.

Returning to sport or exercise

If you were very active or sporty before your stroke, you might want to get back to your old fitness levels, as well as finding the same enjoyment from doing what you love. You may need to return slowly, to regain fitness and avoid injury after a break.

Try to be patient with yourself. You could start by trying a few minutes of an activity at a time and gradually building it up. Stroke survivors tell us setting small goals helped them to achieve bigger milestones and also manage the impact of fatigue better.

Consider splitting an activity up into manageable chunks. Pace yourself and try to make sure you have breaks planned within an activity and between your next activity. It can be tempting to push yourself to do more if you're having a good day, but this can leave you feeling fatigued later.

Ensuring you eat well and drink enough between periods of exercise will also help you manage energy levels.



Visit the Royal College of Occupational Therapists website at rcot.co.uk for more information on pacing and managing your energy levels with fatigue or long-term health conditions.

Try something new

It can be frustrating if you find that you cannot go back to a previous activity, but you might be able to carry on with sport in a new way. Think about what you love about your sport. Is it being in a team? Is it about challenging yourself? If you enjoyed the social side of your sport, there may be other ways you can still be involved, for example, helping behind the scenes at club sporting events or coaching. There may be some things you can no longer do, but there are plenty of other things you still can.

Or you could look for other activities that might offer similar things. Some sports have inclusive versions such as walking football, sailing, rugby and tandem cycling.

You might be able to access sport with some help or equipment, such as running with a sighted friend if you have sight loss. People tell us having some support from others can help them if they have lost confidence or feel unsure about returning to sport after a stroke.

See 'Other sources of help and information' on page 38 for details of organisations which can help you find inclusive or adapted sports and activities.



Tip: Ask an occupational therapist or physiotherapist for advice on adapting equipment and finding new ways of doing things.

I'm worried that...

Some of the common concerns and fears people have about becoming more active.

I might have another stroke

Sometimes people worry being active could cause another stroke. But the opposite is true. Moving and being active is a great way to stay healthy and avoid another stroke. So unless your doctor tells you otherwise, moving and being active is safe, and it could make all the difference to your health and wellbeing.

I might get injured

As long as you do things that you're capable of, you can move and be more active. Do not avoid being active because you're worried.

If you have any health problems such as atrial fibrillation or diabetes, it's a good idea to speak to your doctor before starting to become more active. If you're not sure what you can do, seek advice from a professional like a therapist or trained exercise coach. An occupational therapist can help you find new ways of doing things if you need to adapt an activity you previously enjoyed.

My blood pressure will go up

If you have high blood pressure, physical activity can help to reduce it over time.

When you do something that makes your heart beat faster, such as running, your blood pressure goes up, but goes back down when you rest. By exercising regularly, you actually make the heart stronger and more efficient. Over time, your resting blood pressure can go down to a healthier level.

However, if you have very high blood pressure, you should speak to your doctor before starting to be more active, to make sure it's safe for you. Ask your pharmacist if your medication could affect you during exercise.

I have several health problems

If you have a number of health problems together like diabetes and a heart condition, and you're not sure what level of activity you can do, speak to your doctor.

What being active can do for you



Staying healthy

Being active can help you stay healthy and feel good, and it can also reduce your risk of another stroke. Being active can:

- Lower your blood pressure.
- Help you manage diabetes.
- Reduce cholesterol.
- Strengthen your heart and improve your circulation.
- Reduce the risk of a blood clot.
- Help with weight loss.



Fatigue

Being active can help with fatigue. You might need to plan in some extra rest time, but moving more can improve your energy levels and help you sleep better. It can improve your fitness and muscle strength, which may also make you feel less tired.

Visit stroke.org.uk/fatigue for more information



Independence and recovery

You can gain more independence through being active, because you are moving and using the parts of your body in a new way. You can practise walking, lifting things and using your hands. Repetition helps you get stronger and re-learn skills for everyday tasks like dressing, cooking and travelling.



Wellbeing and confidence

Moving your body helps your emotional wellbeing. Even a small amount more exercise can help reduce feelings of anxiety and stress. It can also help build your confidence about yourself if you start to feel good about reaching your goals, trying new things and meeting new people.



Pain

Staying active and mobile can help with long-term pain by reducing muscle stiffness and improving wellbeing. Choose an activity that's safe for you – you may need to check with your physiotherapist or GP to make sure. Try smaller movements in a pain-free range and rest if you need to. It's common to get sore muscles when you start off with a new exercise, but if it's a sharp pain or you are worried, stop and check with your fitness instructor, a GP or therapist.



How can I be active if I have...

Practical tips for dealing with some of the effects of a stroke if you want to be more active.



Emotional effects

Being active is known to be great for emotional wellbeing. But if you're experiencing anxiety or low mood, it can be hard to get started. So have a look at our tips for getting motivated in this guide. It can really help to find someone to do things with or share your goals with. If you're struggling with low mood or anxiety, ask your GP for help. For more information, visit stroke.org.uk/emotional-changes



Vision problems

If your eyes are very sensitive to light, try wearing sunglasses or a baseball cap. If you have low vision or perceptual problems, good indoor lighting and a tidy, uncluttered space can help. If you're in a group activity, the instructor can support you by providing extra verbal descriptions and brightly coloured equipment. You could try outdoor activities like walking or running alongside a friend. For more information, visit stroke.org.uk/vision-problems



Continence problems

If you are worried about leaking wee or poo while you're moving around, talk to your doctor, nurse or therapist, as many bladder and bowel problems can improve with treatment. Some kinds of exercise are more likely to cause leaks, such as high impact sports like netball and running. This can happen even if you do not normally have incontinence. Lower-impact activities that might avoid leaks include walking, chair-based exercises, swimming and cycling.

You can still do your fitness activity but go prepared. Use incontinence pads if you need to. You can buy them from most pharmacies or supermarkets. Take a change of clothes and a wash kit, and use the toilet just before you start. For more information, visit stroke.org.uk/continence-problems



Weakness down one side and spasticity

A stroke can cause weakness or paralysis in arms and legs. It can also lead to very stiff muscles, or spasticity. You can still be active, but do things at your own pace, using smaller movements you can manage. Relax or stretch if you need to. Using your unaffected side too much can sometimes lead to problems with the affected side. So get advice from a therapist if you need to.



Balance problems

You can still be active even if your balance is a problem. A therapist or trained exercise coach should be able to give you advice on safe movements and how to improve your balance. You can do activities on a chair or a mat, or use machines if you go to a gym. If you are standing, hold onto a chair back or lean against a wall. Your GP can refer you to a physiotherapist if you need help with balance problems.



Fatigue

You might feel too tired to be active, but regular exercise can actually help give you more energy, better sleep and make you feel less fatigued. Try a few different activities and find out what you enjoy and what works for you. Start slowly, and build up over time, to avoid making the fatigue worse. Overall energy levels should improve, but you might need to build in time for some extra rests during and after activities.

'The smallest activity exhausted me, such as walking up and down the stairs. Eventually, I was able to slowly introduce previously normal tasks, but it was all very gradual and paced out so I could rest in between.'

Nicola, stroke survivor

Where to get help and information

From the Stroke Association

Stroke Support Helpline

Our Stroke Support Helpline is for anyone affected by a stroke, including family, friends and carers. The Helpline can give you information and support on any aspect of stroke.

Call us on **0303 3033 100**, from a textphone
18001 0303 3033 100 or email helpline@stroke.org.uk

Read our information

Log onto stroke.org.uk where you can find easy-to-understand information, videos and an online community to support you.

You can also call our Stroke Support Helpline to ask for printed copies of any our guides.

Other sources of help and information

Getting started with movement and activity

Chartered Society of Physiotherapy

Website: csp.org.uk/activity

Ideas and videos from physiotherapists about moving, being active and having fun.

This Girl Can

Website: thisgirlcan.co.uk

Ways to feel more confident about your body by being active, plus how to get started.

We Are Undefeatable

Website: weareundefeatable.co.uk

Inspiring stories and practical resources to help you be more active when you have a health condition or disability.

Walking

Ramblers Association (England, Scotland, Wales)

Website: ramblers.org.uk/go-walking-hub/walking-health-conditions

Tel: **020 3961 3232**

Online resources about walking outdoors with a health condition or disability, plus a search tool for local groups.

Inclusive sports and activities

Disability Sport NI

Website: dsni.co.uk

Tel: 028 9046 9925

Disability Sport Wales

Website: disabilitysportwales.com

Every Body Moves

Website: everybodymoves.org.uk

Has a postcode search tool to help find inclusive sports and activities near you.

Scottish Disability Sport

Website: scottishdisabilitysport.com

Tel: 0131 317 1130

Sportability (England)

Website: sportability.org.uk

Tel: 07305 047 533

Email: info@sportability.org.uk

Swim England

Website:

swimming.org/justswim/swimming-after-a-stroke

Information on swimming after a stroke.

About our information

We want to provide the best information for people affected by stroke. That's why we ask stroke survivors and their families, as well as medical experts, to help us put our publications together.



How did we do?

To tell us what you think of this guide, or to request a list of the sources we used to create it, email us at feedback@stroke.org.uk



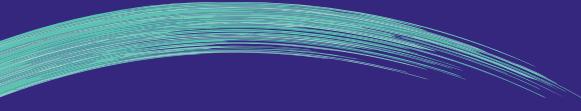
Accessible formats

Visit our website if you need this information in audio, large print or braille.



Always get individual advice

This guide contains general information about stroke. But if you have a problem, you should get individual advice from a professional such as a GP or pharmacist. Our Stroke Support Helpline can also help you find support. We work very hard to give you the latest facts, but some things change. We don't control the information provided by other organisations or websites.



Remember, you are not alone. We are here to support you throughout your recovery, whenever you need us.

Contact us

Stroke Support Helpline: **0303 3033 100**
From a textphone: **18001 0303 3033 100**
Email: **helpline@stroke.org.uk**
Website: **stroke.org.uk**



Finding **strength** through **support**

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