

Occupational therapy after stroke

Stroke Support Helpline: 0303 3033 100
or email: helpline@stroke.org.uk

This guide is about the role of occupational therapy in your recovery and rehabilitation after a stroke. It explains what happens in occupational therapy and how to access it.

What is occupational therapy?

Occupational therapy helps you regain the skills you need for day-to-day activities and other things you want to do. It involves re-learning or adapting everyday activities to enable you to lead a full and independent life. Occupational therapy can be an important part of your recovery and rehabilitation if you have difficulties with everyday tasks after a stroke.

It may be that you need to regain skills for daily tasks such as getting out of a chair, washing yourself or making a hot drink. Perhaps you would like to continue a hobby you had before your stroke, like painting or playing a musical instrument. If you worked before your stroke, occupational therapy can help you return to work.

Occupational therapists (also known as OTs) are qualified, registered healthcare professionals. They often work with other members of the stroke team to help with the full range of problems which can occur after stroke.

The team may include physiotherapists, speech and language therapists, doctors, nurses and social workers, plus other specialists. This is often called the multidisciplinary stroke team.

You may see occupational therapists at different times following your stroke, depending on your needs. Occupational therapy may begin in hospital, or you might be offered it if your needs change later in your recovery. Therapists can be based in different settings and locations. These might include hospitals, community rehabilitation services, social services departments, housing associations, wheelchair services and mental health teams. You may be seen in your own home or online using video calls.

How can an occupational therapist (OT) help me?

Your OT can help you develop your skills and the confidence to manage activities that are important to your health and wellbeing.

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After your stroke, you may be facing a range of difficulties that make it harder for you to do the things you would like to. This might include physical problems, vision changes, difficulties with thinking processes such as concentration, memory and problem-solving, or the emotional impact of stroke, such as experiencing depression or anxiety.

Your OT will work with you to find ways of overcoming any difficulties. They might give you therapeutic activities to practise, help you find new ways of doing things, or suggest equipment that could help.

Your OT will help you to set goals that are important to you. Your goals can be broken down into smaller, more manageable tasks. For example, your goal may be to prepare a meal for your family. You might start by helping someone else in the kitchen, then preparing a snack for yourself, gradually building up your confidence and abilities.

Setting goals to support your recovery

We have more tips on how to set goals and a downloadable goal planner at stroke.org.uk/stroke/recovery/goals

Depending on your needs, an OT may:

- Assess your post-stroke difficulties and help you and your family understand them better.
- Adapt activities and help you practise them to improve your abilities and independence. These may be personal care activities, such as washing and dressing, domestic tasks such as preparing a meal, or social and leisure activities like travelling and visiting friends.
- Teach you strategies and techniques to overcome difficulties.
- Provide psychological support and refer you for additional specialist help if you need it.

- If you need some physical support to move around, a therapist can advise your family or carers on how to help you do this safely.
- Carry out a home assessment. An OT will visit your home to assess if you could manage in your home environment and advise on any useful adaptations.
- Arrange aids and equipment, such as a wheelchair or grab rails, or specialist kitchen or bathroom equipment.
- Advise on the best way and best time for you to return to work. This may include talking to your employer, with your consent, about how they can support you. See stroke.org.uk/work for more detailed information on work after stroke and the range of support available, or call our Stroke Support Helpline.
- Help your family or carers to understand how the stroke has affected your ability to function and how best to support you.
- Contribute to the review of your long-term needs, whether this is at home, in a care home or nursing home.

What does occupational therapy involve?

While you are in hospital, you should be assessed to find out if you need any therapies to help with your recovery, including occupational therapy. You should receive all the therapy you need and can cope with, for up to three hours a day, five days a week, although the amount can vary depending on your individual needs and where you live.

Occupational therapy may continue when you leave hospital if you have goals you still want to achieve. If you are finding it difficult to access the therapy you need, call our Stroke Support Helpline for information on finding support.

Early assessment and care

First, your OT will assess your strengths and abilities, and any difficulties you may have following your stroke. This is likely to cover how you can manage daily activities, your ability to move around and any problems with sensation, vision and perception. OTs may assess your thinking skills and explore how this affects how you do things. Your OT may ask you about your mood to see if you are feeling depressed or anxious. They can give you advice or refer you to another specialist.

An important part of occupational therapy in this early stage is understanding your routines, hobbies and home environment. During an assessment, you may be observed doing everyday tasks such as washing, dressing or making a hot drink in the kitchen. Your OT may also ask questions or use assessment packs to learn more about your abilities. You should tell them about anything you're finding difficult.

Your OT should work with you to agree a rehabilitation plan tailored to your individual needs. Together, you will set your goals for things you want to achieve.

They can also help you deal with any setbacks that may arise. The OT can help you measure your progress, for example by breaking down each activity into stages that you can achieve one at a time.

Your OT or other team members, such as OT assistants, will also teach you, your family or carers how to look after your health. They should also make sure any help needed to do this is in place.

Practising activities

A big part of your OT's role is to work with you to improve your ability to carry out your day-to-day activities. These are sometimes called 'activities of daily living', and can include everyday tasks like dressing, cooking and shopping.

Your OT may use activities to assess how your stroke has affected you. They may look at ways to alter an activity to help your recovery or to make it easier for you to carry out.

You should be given opportunities to practise in the most natural and homelike setting possible. This may involve going to a kitchen area to practise making a meal or cup of tea. You may practise washing yourself and dressing with the OT.

As time goes on, activities might be made harder, to challenge you and gradually improve your stamina and confidence. Your OT can teach you strategies to overcome any difficulties, for example, learning how to manage your energy levels if you have fatigue.

Therapeutic activities

The OT mainly uses everyday tasks to assess and treat your difficulties. For example, they might give you particular activities to do to target a specific problem, known as a therapeutic activity. Activities will depend on the type of difficulty you have.

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For example, if you have problems using your arm, you might practise a task that involves moving your arm and hand in a particular way. You and anyone else involved in your care will be shown how to do your activities.

Occupational therapy will help you increase your confidence with carrying out the day-to-day tasks that are important to you.

It's important to build up your activity levels to help you regain as much independence as possible. Your OT will advise on activities for you to practise by yourself. Practising outside of therapy sessions can help you reach your goals.

Living independently

Your OT will help you develop skills so you can carry out activities as independently as possible. Some problems may not be apparent until you're in a home environment. While you're in hospital, an OT may help prepare and guide you and your family through the process of leaving hospital (discharge).

They will ask about your home environment, such as the height of your chairs and bed, what kind of bath or shower you have and whether you have stairs. The OT may do a home visit with you, so you can try out various tasks at home and check you will be safe. They can advise on equipment, the layout of your home, or any help needed to make your life easier and safer.

Equipment

Some people might find special equipment helpful, such as a non-slip mats to stop spills while you're eating or cutlery that's easier to hold. You may need equipment to make your home safer. This could include raised toilet seats, a shower seat for bathing, or an additional rail to help you use the stairs.

If you have a carer, it's helpful for them to be with you when the OT visits, so they can be involved in planning and be shown how to use the equipment.

Some of this equipment can be loaned to you for free by the NHS or your local council, for as long as you need it.

Your OT can give advice if you need adaptations to your home. Minor adaptations you need to your home should be provided for free, but your OT will be able to tell you more about what is available in your area.

If you need more major adaptations to your home, you may be able to apply for a Disabled Facilities Grant (in England, Northern Ireland and Wales) towards the cost. This grant is means-tested. In Scotland, your council's social services department can tell you about any grants that may be available to you.

For more information on equipment, see stroke.org.uk/equipment or call our Stroke Support Helpline.

When will my therapy end?

Occupational therapy aims to support you to meet your personal goals, often within agreed timeframes. If a particular goal is hard to reach, you may agree with your OT to adjust it or focus on another goal. You will agree with your OT when you have reached your goals and your therapy sessions may end. Your OT should discuss how you can maintain your progress and support you to continue to do the tasks you wish to do. They will also advise you how to get more support if your needs change in future.

How do I get occupational therapy?

If you were admitted to hospital after your stroke, you should be assessed by an OT within 24 hours. After leaving hospital, you might see an occupational therapist at a community-based unit or in your own home. Your OT may be part of your local community health service, or they may be from the adult social care department at your local council (often known as 'social services').

If you have difficulties at any time after leaving hospital, you can ask your GP to refer you for help. You can also contact the adult social care department at your local council to arrange an assessment by an OT. In some areas, you may be able to refer yourself.

You should also have a review about six months after your stroke to discuss your progress and check if your needs have changed. You should be advised at your review what support is available, and you may be able to be referred to other services if you need them. You can find out more about six-month reviews at stroke.org.uk/six-month-post-stroke-reviews

Finding a private therapist

You may wish to see a private (independent) OT. For instance, you may feel you could benefit from further therapy after your initial course has finished, or you may want to supplement your treatment. If you have an NHS OT, let them know you plan to do this, both as a courtesy and also to ensure continuity of your treatment and goals. It's possible to receive private and NHS care, provided they take place at a separate time and place.

Check the private therapist is a qualified OT and is registered with the Health and Care Professions Council (see 'Other sources of help and information' on **page 6**). The Royal College of Occupational Therapists (RCOT) has a list of qualified and registered therapists. It's a good idea to ask to see a private therapist's up-to-date registration and insurance certificates.

You must also check the OT has recent experience of working in stroke rehabilitation. They may be able to give you references from other people they have worked with.

The OT should agree how much the therapy will cost, the number of sessions you may need and where they will take place before they start working with you.

Where to get help and information

From the Stroke Association

Stroke Support Helpline

Our Stroke Support Helpline offers information and support for anyone affected by stroke, including family, friends and carers.

Call us on **0303 3033 100**,
Textphone **18001 0303 3033 100**
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 the Stroke Support Helpline to ask for printed copies of our guides.

Other sources of help and information

Health and Care Professions Council

Website: **hcpc-uk.org**

Tel: **0300 500 6184**

Holds a register of health, psychological and social work professionals, including occupational therapists, who meet the national standards of training and practice.

Royal College of Occupational Therapists

Website: **rcot.co.uk**

Tel: **020 3141 4600**

The professional body for all occupational therapy staff in the UK. They have specialist sections covering areas like stroke and private practice. They offer a list of private therapists and advice on choosing a therapist, as well as some resources for patients.

Your notes

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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.

You know more than most just how shocking and confusing having a stroke is. We're here to support you and your family find the strength and determination to get back to life.

Learn more about stroke support: **stroke.org.uk**

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