

Life After Stroke

Physical and Occupational Improvement

- Never lose hope. Research shows it is possible to improve function for many years after stroke. The brain can create new pathways, but constant repetition is required to make these changes.
- Physical and occupational therapy operates on the principle of “forced use” – forcing the affected body part to perform more like they did pre-stroke. This technique promotes stimulation of the brain and is the best chance for regaining function. In other words, the more you use your affected side, the better possibility of recovery.
- Build in daily “functional exercises” for your upper extremity such as turning doorknobs or faucet handles; lifting empty cup to help with grasping; brushing teeth or hair; putting coins in piggy bank; opening your health condition, aim for 3-4 hours/day of “functional exercises” at a minimum. Can be broken into several times/day. Do this with safety in mind and extending the fingers (not just closing the hand to make a fist; this will help reduce spasms in the hand and arm.). These activities should be performed safely with the approval of your physician or therapist
- Build in daily “functional exercises” for your lower extremity such as walking; ascending/descending stairs or curbs; riding a stationary bicycle. These activities should be performed safely with the approval of your physician or therapist.
- Depending on your health condition, aim for a minimum of 3-4 hours/day of “functional exercises”. This can be broken into several times/day. Try to perform the exercises EVERY DAY (If you skip them, you don’t get the benefit). Do this safely and always check with your physician or therapist before beginning or changing an exercise program.
- Being very focused mentally during “functional exercises” brings better results!! Research shows that the exercises need to be mentally taxing to do to get reorganization of the brain. As you work on a movement or task, always seek to add repetitions, make it faster, smoother or move on to a more difficult task to continuously challenge your brain.
- If you have foot drop or an inability to walk without dragging your foot, ask your physician or therapist about a brace such as an **AFO** (ankle foot orthosis).
- Improvement comes from internal motivation. Therapists can help patients improve and reduce their deficits after stroke, but only if the **patient** is motivated to do so. Support from family and friends is helpful for this.
- Don’t allow yourself to cheat with mobility or activities. Relying on compensatory can build bad habits that are hard to break and can hinder regaining “normal” functions.
- Do what your therapist asks you to do at home. Strokes are life-changing events and require intense rehabilitation to regain function. Don’t think that just attending therapy sessions during the week is enough to allow you to meet your goals. It requires consistent effort every day from you!
- Communication is **KEY!** Let your therapist know exactly what **YOUR GOALS** and **NEEDS** are – specifically!