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The Importance of Physical Activity After Stroke

People who suffer a stroke or TIA (Transient Ischaemic Attack), often called a ‘mini-stroke’, have a higher risk of suffering another stroke in the future. One

study found there is around 20% chance of stroke recurring within the first five years (1). There are many factors that can help to reduce the risk of stroke recurring. This includes the amount of exercise you do. As well as being beneficial for preventing a first stroke, 30 minutes of regular physical activity, such as walking or gardening three or four times per week, may reduce the risk of early death by 54% (2).

Exercise could provide protective benefits against stroke

After a stroke, people are less likely to take part in regular exercise due to fatigue, depression and distance from places to exercise (3). But research shows physical activity is a useful tool in rehabilitation. Experts recommend that stroke survivors should undertake cardiovascular, flexibility and coordination training, such as weights and yoga, to improve fitness, balance and walking ability (4).

Training two to three times a week reduces the risk of stroke

Despite debates over the optimal length and intensity of exercise, the general consensus is physical activity can be beneficial in preventing further strokes. Taking part in at least three to four sessions per week, of moderate- to vigorous-intensity aerobic physical exercise, helps to improve overall physical ability, general walking and independence, while also reducing risk factors associated with stroke (5).

Physical activity after stroke can improve brain function

Cognitive problems are very common after stroke. Problems with hand-to-eye coordination, concentration or memory can be incredibly frustrating for the stroke survivor and their family. But some reports suggest exercise can play a critical role in improving brain function, post-stroke, with cognitive benefits occurring within as little as 12 weeks even in the case of long-term stroke patients (6).

Aerobic exercises help to prevent further attacks

As each stroke survivor's experience, age and disability is different, making recommendations for physical activity is difficult. But aerobic activity as part of stroke rehabilitation has been shown to optimise heart and brain benefits as well as reducing the risk of recurrent events. Exercise that gets the heart pumping improves blood flow to every organ of the body, which helps to reduce the chance of narrowing arteries and blood clots that can lead to stroke (5).

There are several ways to adapt exercises after stroke

Many stroke survivors won't be able to return to the same level of physical activity they enjoyed previously. But even a small amount of regular exercise can help keep minds and bodies healthy. Switching to seated activities, such as stationary cycling, is a good way to overcome balance issues, while martial arts, such as Tai Chi, that focus on slow, coordinated movements, are good for improving concentration and balance.

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