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The Truth About Stroke and Exercise

Did you know? Nearly one fourth of all deaths due to heart disease and stroke could be prevented each year, simply through changes in lifestyle habits (1). Of all the things we could alter, studies show physical activity is key when it comes to reducing the risk of health problems, such as high blood pressure, diabetes, obesity, depression and stroke (2). Here’s why exercise is so important when it

comes to reducing stroke risk:

1. **Exercise prevents damage to the blood vessels**

Physical activity doesn't just improve how we look on the outside; it also plays a crucial role on the inside. Exercise helps to prevent the build-up of plaque inside the arteries. Essentially, while improving blood flow to all of the body's organs, exercise stops the process of blood vessels narrowing and clogging, which can lead to heart disease (2). It's likely that these protective effects are also beneficial in preventing stroke and problems with brain function.

2. **Exercise can reduce the risk of stroke by 20%**

Studies show engaging in any physical activity is better than doing none at all. What's more, the benefits are even greater the more intensively you exercise and the longer you take part in it. For the best health benefits, adults should spend at least 150 minutes per week taking part in moderate exercise, such as brisk walking, or 75 minutes per week of intense exercise, such as running (2).

3. **Exercise improves healing in stroke survivors**

Exercise is just as beneficial before a stroke as afterwards. People who had regularly exercised, yet still suffered a stroke, were shown to have less damage to their brain and heal faster after the stroke. In addition to this, those who started a physical activity plan after a stroke saw positive cognitive benefits within as little as 12 weeks. This shows that physical activity is a widely accessible and low-cost treatment that may preserve or restore brain function (3).

4. **Exercise reduces stroke risk in both men and women**

The risk of having a stroke is different for men and women. For instance, there are more stroke deaths in women than men (4). Despite these differences, both sexes can reduce their risk of stroke through regular physical activity. Literature

suggests that men achieve a greater reduction in stroke risk when they engage in physical activity at a moderate to vigorous intensity, like jogging and swimming. Whereas, women benefit from greater amounts of low intensity physical activity, such as walking (2).

5. **Exercising after stroke helps the entire body**

Stroke often leaves people with debilitating problems including weakness in limbs and some loss of movement. It can also affect balance and make stroke survivors more likely to have a fall. Planning even a small amount of exercise into each day can strengthen muscles and help to improve safety and independence. Regular physical exercise also has a beneficial effect on other risk factors, such as blood pressure, obesity and cholesterol, which can help to prevent a stroke from recurring (5).

References

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