

How to Treat Foot Drop after Stroke

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Learning how to treat foot drop after stroke can be challenging because it requires a counterintuitive approach. Although you cannot control the muscles that lift up your foot, *trying* to move those muscles is exactly how you will regain movement.

Before we dig into a deeper explanation, let's cover the basics.

What Is Foot Drop?

Foot drop involves difficulty lifting the front part of your foot, which is important for a natural gait, or stepping pattern.

For this reason, foot drop makes walking difficult as it causes your foot to drop down toward the floor when you lift your leg up, possibly leading to foot scuffing or worse – falling. Thankfully, there's something you can do about foot drop, which we'll get to in a second.

What Causes Foot Drop?

As you just learned, foot drop is caused by the inability to lift the front part of your foot up. However, this is usually a symptom of a larger, underlying problem like:

- Nerve injury
- Muscle or nerve disorders
- Stroke
- Multiple sclerosis
- Spinal cord injury

While you can't reverse the underlying cause, the symptom of foot drop can be treated.

How Can Foot Drop Be Treated?

Foot drop can be treated with 3 different methods: rehabilitation exercise, orthotics, or electrical stimulation.

1. Rehabilitation Exercise

Rehabilitation exercise is *by far* the best treatment option for foot drop.

Although you cannot control your foot very well right now, it's important to remember that rehabilitation starts in the brain, not the body. As you practice **foot drop exercises**, you are sending signals to the brain. These signals help your brain rewire itself so that it can eventually relearn how to control those muscles.

Although progress may be slow, have faith that rehabilitation exercise is the best way to regain movement in your lower leg and foot.

Don't have any movement in your lower legs? **Passive exercise** can still help your brain relearn how to use those muscles!

2. Orthotics

If there is no function in the foot muscles, ankle-foot orthotics (or supportive braces) can be used. Ankle foot orthotics (AFOs) usually come in the form of leg braces or shoe inserts that support your foot and promote a normal gait. If your therapist says that you need AFOs, please listen to them. They can help prevent devastating falls.

However, don't stop with orthotics. The less you use your foot, the more likely it is that your brain will completely forget how to use it. Read about the dangers of **learned non-use**.

So, if you need an AFO, get it. But don't stop trying to pursue rehabilitation exercises – even if they're just passive movements at first.

3. Functional Electrical Stimulation

Lastly, functional electrical stimulation can help correct foot drop by delivering small electric pulses to the nerves in the paralyzed muscles. Activating the muscles with electrical stimulation can retrain them how to function properly and promote a normal range of motion.

To determine what treatment option is best for you, talk to your therapist so that you can discuss your options.

PS. Try these **foot drop exercises** (with pictures) in our article on 2/3/2017– they're the best way to get your feet cooperating again!