Learned Nonuse: How to Avoid Some Serious Imbalance Issues after Stroke

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“Use it or lose it.”

You’ve probably heard this famous rehab saying before. But did you know that science supports that statement? It’s a phenomenon known as *learned nonuse*.

Today we’re discussing how learned nonuse can potentially hinder your recovery – and how to prevent it from being a problem.

How Learned Nonuse Leaves You Lopsided

Have you ever become frustrated with the impairment of your affected arm or hand? So frustrated that you completely stopped using it for a period of time? Or have you ever neglected using a paralyzed or weakened arm for a long period of time because you simply didn’t have the time or patience for rehab?

The phenomenon of ‘learned nonuse’ results from that frustration and/or neglect.

When you stop using your affected arm and resort to using your 'good' arm for everything, your brain can actually forget how to use you affected arm. As a consequence, reliance on your unaffected arm will increase and the mobility of your affected arm will continue to decrease – making you want to use it even less!

It's a vicious cycle, so don't let it catch up to you! Keep exercising with repetition and consistency and you will get better. It may be difficult, but even maintaining minimal movement can help.

Finding Balance Through a Specific Therapy

Constraint-Induced Movement Therapy (CIMT) is a form of therapy that involves intensive training of the affected arm while restricting movement of the unaffected arm. CIMT helps counteract learned nonuse because, well, it forces you to use the arm you're not using!

But from a more scientific standpoint, CIMT has been shown to have a significant effect on real world outcomes, meaning that your exercises will translate to your daily tasks. That's great news since regaining movement for daily living is the most important goal of your rehabilitation! Read our article on CIMT dated 7/15/2015.

Move a Little Everyday & Don't Give Up

The bottom line is that you need to move your affected muscles a little everyday – otherwise you run the risk of losing the ability to use them altogether. It can be very frustrating to try and move muscles that are difficult or impossible to control – but movement is the only way to rewire your brain and regain control of those muscles for good!

Remember that learned nonuse is reversible and you can regain movement in your body at ANY stage post stroke.

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