

Recovery After Stroke: Healthy Eating

Eating well after stroke is key to your recovery. Choosing healthy foods can help you keep up your energy level for therapy, exercise and favorite activities. And, healthy eating will be easier once you learn to deal with new eating challenges brought on by your stroke.

After a stroke, 8-34% of survivors suffer from malnutrition. This means they aren't getting enough vitamins and minerals because they aren't eating enough healthy foods.

Choosing Healthy Foods

Healthy eating is good for you. It will help you manage your weight and blood pressure. Both are crucial to prevent another stroke and stay healthy. Ask your doctor to arrange a visit with a licensed dietician. The dietician will teach you how to plan meals and snacks to improve your health.

- Plan to eat a variety of foods each day.
- Have a rainbow of color on your plate.

- Eat at least five servings of fruits and vegetables per day.
- Your doctor may suggest a special diet to help you lose weight. Or you may need to eat foods with less salt or fat.

Too Tired to Eat or Cook?

Meal planning, grocery shopping and cooking require a lot of energy. But being tired doesn't mean you should give up on healthy eating.

Planning ahead can help you get the nutrition you need for your stroke recovery.

- Eat your biggest meal early in the day when you have the most energy. The last meal of the day can be simple, such as a sandwich or cereal.
- Look for pre-washed, pre-cut fruits and vegetables at the grocery store. Most places offer apple slices, baby carrots, broccoli florets, celery sticks, mixed vegetables, salad greens and spinach.
- Ask family members and friends to make healthy



meals that you can store in the refrigerator or freezer. Save these foods for the days you are too tired to cook.

- If preparing and eating three meals a day takes too long or takes too much energy, eat six small meals per day instead.
- Many communities offer a “Meals on Wheels” program. Check with your local social services to see how you can get healthy meals delivered to your home through this program.
- Seniors can often get healthy, low-cost meals at senior centers. Check your local newspaper for locations, times and menus.

Have You Lost Your Appetite?

Many survivors don't feel as hungry as they used to and forget to eat during the day.

- Try eating smaller healthy meals throughout the day.
- Attractive, tasty, pleasant-smelling foods may enhance appetite.

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- Be sure to plan three meals a day plus snacks to maintain your health and energy – even when you're not so hungry.
- Eat high-calorie foods in your meal first.
- Sometimes, poor appetite is caused by depression. Your appetite is likely to improve after depression is treated.
- Walk or do some light exercise to stimulate your appetite.

Challenges When Eating

It's hard to eat healthy when you have trouble swallowing, chewing, or using eating utensils.

Swallowing or Chewing Problems

Stroke can weaken or paralyze muscles that help us swallow or chew. About 40-60% of survivors have swallowing difficulties, called dysphagia.

www.stroke.org



Dysphagia can lead to serious medical problems such as dehydration (not enough water), malnutrition (not enough vitamins and minerals), choking, pneumonia and aspiration (when food or liquid leaks into the airways).

Talk to your doctor if you have any of these signs of dysphagia:

- ✓ Cough and sputter frequently.
- ✓ An unusually husky voice or the need to clear your throat often.
- ✓ Food and saliva escape from your mouth or nose when you try to eat.

Most people recover quickly. Some require treatment with a speech-language pathologist (SLP). The SLP can test for dysphagia and suggest strategies or treatments for swallowing and eating.

What can help:

- Cut foods into smaller pieces before chewing.
- Use a blender or food processor to puree foods to the texture of baby food.
- Choose soft foods such as cooked cereal, mashed potatoes, eggs, cottage

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cheese, applesauce, canned fruits and soups.

- Thicken liquids to keep them from going down the wrong pipe. Natural thickeners include tapioca, flour, instant potato flakes, oats and matzo meal.
- A normal swallow is complex. It involves 25 different muscles and 5 nerves. Your SLP may help you exercise these muscles or teach you new ways of swallowing.
- Sometimes, a feeding tube is needed.

Eating Utensils

After your stroke, you may have trouble grasping or holding utensils. Take advantage of special products that can help you:

- Flatware with larger handles or Velcro straps can be easier to grasp.
- Knives with curved blades can help you cut food with one hand.
- Plate guards can help keep food on the plate when using one hand.
- Rubberized pads under the plate can keep it from sliding around.

www.stroke.org



Search for these products and more on the Internet or go to one of the web sites below:

- www.dynamic-living.com
- www.elderstore.net/disabled
- www.abledata.com

Vision and Eating

Vision loss on one side can make it hard to see everything on the plate.

- During meals, rotate your plate or move it right or left so that it is easier to see.

Meals and Social Outings

Eating out is common in the United States. It can also be good for your recovery. Eating out on occasion relieves you of the duties of cooking meals and washing dishes. It also can help you connect socially with others. But, many stroke survivors shy away from restaurants and social outings because they have problems getting around or filtering out noise. Some of the following tips may help:

- Call ahead to see if the place has parking, entry ramps, eating space and bathrooms needed to host guests in wheelchairs.

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- Choose a place that is less crowded, doesn't have a lot of blaring music, and has smaller tables.
- Find a quiet corner, if possible.
- Avoid busy times.
- Go to a familiar restaurant where you know the menu.
- Request a booth or table where you can sit across from others but face a wall; this can reduce distractions in the restaurant.
- Mentally rehearse what you want to order.
- Have family or friends help you order.
- Consider using picture cards if you have problems ordering.
- Bring a card that says "I have aphasia" and show it to the restaurant staff.

Visit the following web site to get the "I have aphasia" cards or for more information on companies that offer photo cards:

- www.aphasia.org/aphasiaaddresources.php#speech

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What Can Help

- If you wear dentures, see your dentist to check how they fit. Loose dentures can interfere with chewing and swallowing. Dentures that don't fit well can also cause you pain, which can kill your appetite. Medicines, mouth dryness and other medical changes can affect denture fit. Have your dentist check them at least once a year.
- Nutrition drinks and liquid supplements, such as Ensure®, can be used to supplement your diet if you are not getting enough nutrients due to eating problems.
- If you're diabetic, be aware that a stroke can change your ability to eat the same foods or give yourself insulin shots. Talk to your doctor about how to manage your diabetes given your changes.
- Medical conditions such as high blood pressure or bladder and bowel problems require changes in your diet.
- Get information on stroke recovery from National

Stroke Association. Visit www.stroke.org or call 1-800-STROKES (1-800-787-6537).

- Contact your local stroke association.
- Join a stroke support group. Other survivors will understand, validate your issues, and offer encouragement and ideas for eating healthy.

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*Eating is important to your health.
After stroke, small changes can
make a
big difference.*

Professionals Who Can Help

- ✓ A dietician or nutritionist
- ✓ Speech and language therapist
– to find one in your area call the
American Speech-Language-
Hearing Association at
(800) 638-8255.
- ✓ Dentist
- ✓ A general physician or doctor,
for diet recommendations or
referrals.

Rehabilitation is a lifetime commitment and an important part of recovering from a stroke. Through rehabilitation, you relearn basic skills such as talking, eating, dressing and walking. Rehabilitation can also improve your strength, flexibility and endurance. The goal is to regain as much independence as possible.

Remember to ask your doctor,
“Where am I on my stroke recovery
journey?”

Note: This fact sheet is compiled from general, publicly available medical information and should not be considered recommended treatment for any particular individual. Stroke survivors should consult their doctors about any personal medical concerns.

*NSA publications are reviewed for scientific and medical accuracy by the NSA Publications Committee.
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