

# How to Recover from Brain Stem Stroke (10 Side Effects and Treatments)

June 1, 2018



If you're looking for comprehensive information about brain stem stroke, you've come to the right place. In this article, you'll learn about the top 10 side effects from this rare type of stroke. You'll also learn best practices for recovery.

Let's get straight to it.

## Brain Stem Stroke Side Effects

Generally speaking, the larger the stroke was, the more side effects there will be. Every stroke is different, though, so every recovery will be different. You may experience a few or many of these brain stem stroke side effects:

1. Loss of smell and/or taste
2. Partial or complete hearing loss
3. Difficulty breathing
4. Locked-in syndrome (very rare)
5. Difficulty swallowing (dysphagia)

6. Vertigo, dizziness, severe imbalance issues
7. Vision problems
8. Weakness or paralysis in all 4 limbs
9. Numbness or loss of sensation
10. Difficulty speaking (dysarthria, which is different from aphasia)

As you can see, this list is quite long, so it's important to work closely with your medical team during brain stem stroke recovery. To supplement (not substitute) their advice, we'd like to share important information about treatment.

## How to Treat Stroke Side Effects

Stroke side effects are caused by damage to the brain, so treatment will involve healing the brain. Luckily, your brain already knows how to heal itself — with your help — through a process known as **neuroplasticity**. Neuroplasticity allows your brain to rewire and restructure itself by forming new neural pathways.

**When the brain stem becomes damaged by stroke, neuroplasticity allows the surrounding parts of the brain to “pick up the slack.”**



**Neuroplasticity is your key to recovery.** You can activate neuroplasticity through repetition. Your brain likes to be efficient, so whatever you frequently do is what your brain will get better at. The more you repeat a task, the stronger the neural pathways in your brain become. That's why habits become second nature – the neural pathways have been heavily reinforced.

## Treating Brain Stem Stroke with Practice

The best way to treat your stroke side effects, then, is with *practice*. Practice will help you rewire your brain and rebuild your skills. Unfortunately, some brain stem stroke side effects aren't “practice-able” – like the first 4 side effects listed above (loss of smell/taste, loss of hearing, difficulty breathing, locked-in syndrome).

Those side effects might go away on their own or unfortunately, they might stick around. The good news is that the other 5 side effects *are* practice-able – which means that you can start improving them today.

Here's a breakdown of treatment for each one:

## **How to Treat Dysphagia (Difficulty Swallowing)**

When you have difficulty swallowing, it can make eating and drinking difficult because you might choke or aspirate (inhale food into the lungs). Luckily, you can work to overcome dysphagia by working with a Speech Language Pathologist who will take you through various exercises to improve your oral motor skills. For example, an SLP might have you do various tongue and speech exercises to help you regain control of your mouth and swallowing abilities.

## **How to Treat Vertigo, Dizziness, and Imbalance Issues**

Vertigo and imbalance after brain stem stroke is likely caused by impairment to your sense of balance. By practicing balance exercises, you can improve your sense of balance, and your vertigo and dizziness may improve.

## **How to Treat Vision Problems**

Vision problems can be tricky to treat because there could be various causes. Sometimes you cannot improve your vision, other times you practice eye exercises and other forms of vision therapy to improve your eyesight after stroke.

## **How to Treat Weakness in All 4 Limbs**

The best way to regain strength in your limbs is by practicing rehab exercises. The more you practice your exercises, the more your mobility will improve as your brain rewires itself. High repetition should be greatly emphasized so that the brain has the stimulation it needs to recover.

## **How to Treat Paralysis in All 4 Limbs**

If you suffer from paralysis, then you need to start with passive exercise before you can begin active exercise. Although it's challenging, you might be able to reintroduce movement into your body with enough repetitive passive exercise.

## **How to Treat Numbness or Loss of Sensation**

Numbness is a sensory problem that can be treated by practicing sensory reeducation exercises. Sensory reeducation simply involves retraining your brain "how to feel" again.

## **How to Treat Dysarthria**

Dysarthria is a speech condition characterized by slurred or slow speech. Unlike aphasia, dysarthria is a motor problem where you cannot control the muscles in your mouth and tongue (i.e. your "speech muscles"). Luckily, you can practice speech therapy exercises to regain your ability to use your speech muscles.

## **Recovering from Brain Stem Stroke**

Overall, there is hope for brain stem stroke recovery. Work with your medical team to identify your stroke side effects and create a rehabilitation plan. Be sure to include lots of practice in your plan because repetition is the key to recovery.