

7 Dangers of Skipping Exercise After Stroke

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Your therapist probably told you that exercise after stroke is really important. But, even though you know it's good for you, how often do you actually get around to it? Sometimes, it's easier to get motivated when you focus on why action is good and why *not* taking action is bad.

So, in this article, we'll discuss 7 awful things that can happen when you don't exercise after stroke. Hopefully it will motivate you to start a daily movement habit, so that you can keep moving forward.

But before we dig in, we have one quick thing to mention.

What If You Can't Exercise After Stroke Because of Paralysis?

If you're frustrated because post stroke paralysis prevents you from exercising, then consider starting with passive exercise. Passive exercise simply involves using your non-affected muscles to assist your affected muscles through a movement. (A caregiver can also help assist if this is too difficult.) Passive exercise helps rewire the brain and improve movement after stroke. It's also just plain good

for you. And with that, let's dig into those 7 awful things that happen when you *don't* exercise after stroke.

1. Your Muscles Slowly Waste Away

Your body likes to conserve energy, and it's really good at it. Often, this results in muscles loss when you aren't active. Muscles are "expensive" to your body because they require a lot of calories to maintain. So, when you stop using your muscles, your body will start to get rid of muscle tissue to "save energy." This is called atrophy, and many stroke survivors lose muscle due to atrophy after stroke.

How to prevent it:

To prevent atrophy, you just need to *use your muscles*. While this can be very exhausting in the early stages of recovery – perhaps due to post stroke fatigue – it will get easier in time. Daily movement is important because your brain gets the message that, "Oh, these muscles are being used, so we won't get rid of them. They're worth keeping around."

2. You Stop Getting Better

Most stroke survivors sustain movement impairments after stroke. And the best way to get better at moving is to practice rehab exercises frequently. When you don't exercise frequently, you don't get better. Your body does not get the stimulation it needs to heal, and your progress slows down – if not stops altogether.

How to prevent it:

Recovery = repetition + consistency. If you want to get better, you need to find a solid rehabilitation regimen that encourages repetition and consistency. The more reps you do, the more your brain will rewire itself; and the more consistent you are, the stronger the new connections in your brain will become. So start moving every day, and be systematic about it.

3. You Could Actually Regress Backwards

Let's say that you've been consistently doing an exercise program for a few months. Because of your hard work, you've seen really good results and you're motivated to keep going. But after a few months, you hit a plateau, and you become so discouraged by the slow-down that you stop exercising altogether.

While this certainly won't help you get better, it could actually make your progress go backwards. This is known as regression. Sometimes regression happens even when you're in the middle of an effective therapy program, and that's just the natural ebb and flow of recovery. As long as you don't stop, things will correct themselves. But when you stop exercising altogether, you can regress and lose some of your hard work.

How to prevent it:

Consistency, consistency, consistency.

As you rewire your brain with repetitive practice, your brain forms new neural connections. And when you consistently reinforce the new movements that you're trying to relearn, the connections in your brain become stronger. With enough consistent practice, your movement improvement will become solidified and you won't have to worry about regression.

4. Your Brain Might Forget About Your Muscles Altogether

Are you ready for the worst case scenario? It's not pretty...

If you don't exercise after stroke, and you completely neglect your affected muscles, then you could develop learned non-use. Learned non-use happens when you neglect your muscles for long enough that your brain literally forgets how to use them. Remember: Your brain likes to be as efficient as possible. If you stop using a particular muscle group for long enough, your brain will stop "wasting energy" with it.

How to prevent it:

Preventing learned non-use is very simple: move your muscles daily. If you have post stroke paralysis, then have someone move your paralyzed muscles through their range of motion daily. (You can often do this yourself, too.) Although you aren't moving your muscles yourself, the stimulation will tell your brain that those muscles are still in use and not to forget about them!

5. Your Risk of Recurrent Stroke Goes Up

Many stroke risk factors are aggravated by lack of exercise, like high cholesterol and being overweight. Without exercise after stroke, your health can decline and your risk of another stroke goes up. Unfortunately, many stroke survivors live in fear of another stroke, but it's something that you can take steps to prevent.

How to prevent it:

To reduce your risk of recurrent stroke, it's important to manage your stroke risk factors. Often, it's as simple as exercising and eating a healthy diet.

6. Your Risk of Depression Goes Up

There is a strong connection between depression and a sedentary lifestyle. Unfortunately, the physical limitations that often happen after stroke can prevent you from moving the way you want to – but don't let this stop you from moving altogether. Daily movement is essential for your mental health.

How to prevent it:

Daily exercise can help reduce depression after stroke. Sometimes depression is caused by something deeper than just exercise – like the psychological impact of stroke, or changes to the brain. In some cases, medication is a good option to consider. If you aren't keen on taking medication, then try giving daily exercise a try.

Endorphins, the feel-good neurotransmitter that your brain produces through exercise, are some of the best "uppers" around!

7. Your Confidence Takes a Hit

A sedentary lifestyle often leads to weight gain and muscle atrophy. This can make anyone's confidence take a hit.

How to prevent it:

In our book [*Healing & Happiness After Stroke*](#), we talk about boosting confidence after stroke by focusing on your *values*.

Instead of finding confidence in how you look or the way you move, try to find confidence in your values, like patience and work ethic. When your daily exercise habit reinforces your values of patience and hard work, your self-esteem will improve, and so will your health!

Why You Really Need Exercise After Stroke

We hope this article has motivated to start a daily movement habit because it's reeeally good for you.

There's a lot to gain by moving your body, and a lot to lose if you don't.