

# What Is a Stroke? 12 Things You Must Know

October 30, 2017



*Q: What is a stroke?*

If you don't know anything about stroke, then you've come to the right place.

Today, you'll learn what a stroke is – along with everything else that goes into stroke recovery and treatment.

Because stroke recovery involves many interweaving variables, this article is pretty long. Here's an overview of what you'll find:

1. What is a stroke?
2. Stroke symptoms
3. Immediate stroke treatment
4. Causes of stroke
5. Diagnosis

6. Side effects of stroke
7. Best treatment
8. Left vs right side stroke recovery
9. Stroke rehabilitation
10. Care and stroke rehabilitation at home
11. Life After Stroke
12. Stroke Prevention

Now that you know what to expect, let's dig in.

## 1. What Is a Stroke?

A stroke occurs when the supply of blood in the brain is cut off either by a clogged or burst artery. There are 2 types of strokes that can occur:

- **Ischemic stroke** occurs when a blood clot blocks an artery in the brain
- **Hemorrhagic stroke** occurs when an artery in the brain leaks or bursts, leading to damaged brain tissue

Sometimes a “mini-stroke” happens called a **transient ischemic attack** (TIA). TIA's occur when the blood flow in the brain is blocked only for a short time. This is a “mini” version of an ischemic stroke.

Since brain cells cannot survive without oxygen, the lack of oxygen-rich blood causes brain damage which results in stroke side effects. We will discuss these side effects under #6.

## 2. Symptoms of Stroke

*Any time the blood supply to the brain is compromised, it is an emergency and you should call 9-1-1 immediately.* Quick treatment could save a life and help reduce the severity of the stroke side effects.

To identify someone having a stroke, remember the acronym F.A.S.T.:

### Facial drooping:

A stroke causes one side of the face to droop. Ask the person to smile and see if his/her smile is crooked.

### Arm weakness:

A stroke often causes weakness on one side of the body. Ask the person to raise both of his/her arms and see if he/she has trouble raising one arm.

### Speech difficulties:

A stroke can inhibit your ability to understand or produce speech. Ask the person to say something and see if it's jumbled.

Time:

If any of these symptoms are present, call 9-1-1 *immediately*. A stroke is a medical emergency. There is only a 3 to 4.5 hour window to use clot-busting drugs and restore the supply of the blood in the brain.

### 3. Stroke Treatment Starts Immediately



Once in the hospital, treatment starts immediately.

For ischemic stroke, clot-busting drugs like aspirin or TPA are administered to help dissolve the clot. For hemorrhagic stroke, surgery is often required to help stop the bleeding.

This is the first treatment that occurs. Since stroke causes brain damage, it will cause side effects that need to be rehabilitated.

### 4. Causes of Stroke

After stroke has been treated in the hospital, doctors will attempt to assess what caused the stroke. Unfortunately, there are some stroke risk factors that are out of your control such as history of heart attack (which increases your risk of stroke).



Luckily, there are other stroke risk factors that you CAN control, such as high blood pressure, cigarette smoking, atherosclerosis, high cholesterol, and poor diet. If you have any of these stroke risk factors, then work to reduce your risk of stroke by improving your lifestyle choices.

## 5. Diagnosis Using the NIH Stroke Scale

Along with assessing the causes of stroke, doctors will also assess the impact of stroke using the **NIH Stroke Scale**. The NIH Stroke Scale is a neurological assessment that determines the severity of a stroke by assessing bodily functions. For example, some areas of assessment include arm movement, sensation (ability to feel pinpricks on all 4 limbs), and language skills.

## 6. Side Effects of Stroke

Depending on the size, severity, and location of your stroke, you will have stroke side effects that need to be rehabilitated. Here's a list of potential stroke side effects that you may need to overcome:

- Spasticity (stiff, tight muscles)
- Impaired gait (manner of walking) and foot drop (inability to lift your foot properly)
- Swallowing problems
- Balance problems
- One-sided neglect
- Emotional changes like depression, anxiety, or emotional lability (uncontrollable emotions)
- Aphasia (difficulty speaking/understanding language)
- Impaired vision

This is just a shortened list of stroke side effects, though. For a deeper understanding, see our guide dated 2/27/2017.

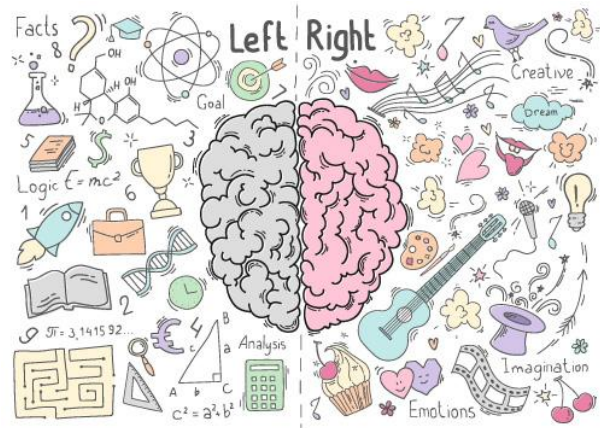
## 7. The Best Treatment for Stroke Side Effects



Most stroke survivors will participate in rehabilitation after stroke to overcome their stroke side effects. Because movement impairment is very common after stroke, rehabilitation usually involves both physical and occupational therapy to help improve mobility.

The best treatment for movement impairments is rehabilitation exercise. Rehab exercise helps **rewire the brain** and restore movement in the body. Based on your stroke side effects, there are many other therapies and treatments that you can try to boost your recovery, like acupuncture, oxygen therapy, and mirror therapy. To learn more, see our guide.

## 8. Different Patients Will Have Different Recoveries



It's very important to understand that **every stroke is different** and every recovery will be **different**. During the NIHSS assessment, doctors will attempt to determine which part of the brain was damaged. This is important because different parts of the brain control different bodily functions.

The location of your stroke will give you an idea of what stroke side effects to expect.



## 9. Stroke Rehabilitation Happens Both In and Out of the Clinic

Stroke rehabilitation involves the process of recovering from stroke. This includes things like physical and occupational therapy, but rehabilitation also includes literally all other activities in a stroke survivor's life.

For example, the task of getting dressed should be considered rehabilitation because it forces the patient to use muscles groups that were probably compromised by stroke.

Therefore, getting dressed is no longer a simple task. It probably takes much more effort to complete – but the act of completing it helps the patient get better (by stimulating the brain with movement).

**So it's important to understand that stroke recovery isn't just something that you do at the clinic.** Rather, stroke recovery becomes a stroke survivor's life until they make enough progress to resume life as normal – or as close to normal as possible.

## 10. Care and Stroke Rehabilitation at Home



Because mobility is often an issue after stroke, it's important to adapt the home to improve safety. Tools like grab rails in the shower or slip-resistant mats are important for preventing falls, which stroke patients are at a higher risk of.

Once stroke patients are discharged from the clinic, beginning a home rehabilitation program can ensure that progress continues. In these home exercise programs, stroke patients are encouraged to keep practicing therapeutic exercises to keep improving movement.

Our FitMi home therapy device is an example of home therapy for stroke survivors. It motivates patients to get moving and keep improving well after discharge from the clinic (or even in conjunction to regular physical therapy sessions).

## 11. Life After Stroke



Although rehabilitation is extremely challenging, hard work is rewarded by massive gains in progress. It's important to allow yourself to slow down and take lots of naps as needed (sleep is very important after stroke).

Stroke is a life-changing event that can significantly alter the course of one's life. There will be times where you want to cry and shake your fist in anger, but always remember that there IS a life after stroke. Stroke recovery will turn you into a warrior – that's why many stroke survivors refer to themselves as stroke warriors.

During this time it can be helpful to gather support from friends and family and **stroke support groups** . When times get tough, reach out for someone to lean on.

## 12. Stroke Prevention



Stroke survivors are highly encouraged to reduce their risk of stroke, because once you've had one stroke, you have a greater chance of experiencing another.

Some of the stroke risk factors that you have the best control over are your diet and exercise. A healthy diet and regular exercise are great ways to reduce your risk of stroke and promote good health.

While stroke survivors can become **very anxious** about experiencing another stroke, *taking action* towards preventing another stroke often helps reduce that anxiety.

We hope this article helped shed light on the stroke recovery process for you.