



Swimming after a stroke

This fact sheet explains how you can help an individual participate in swimming and other aquatic activities if they have had a stroke.

Introduction

Stroke is a condition caused by the disruption of normal blood flow to the brain. The effects of a stroke vary depending on which part of the brain has been affected and the extent of damage. Stroke remains one of the leading causes of disability worldwide. People who have had a stroke may experience lasting issues with mobility and independence as well as pain, fatigue, and cognitive and emotional problems.

Getting active again after a stroke can help improve general health and mood, improve strength and flexibility, reduce fatigue and pain, and lessen the risk of another stroke. Swimming or aquatic activity can be of particular benefit as exercising in water offers a range of benefits not seen with land-based exercise. For example, the water pressure and buoyancy make movement easier and reduce the risk of falling during exercise. The resistance provided by water can also be used to improve muscle strength.

Research studies and evidence reviews suggest that exercising in water after a stroke can lead to significant improvements in:

- Balance (reducing the risk of falls).
- Fitness levels (reducing the risk of further stroke).
- Independence (reducing reliance on others).

What you need to know to support swimmers after a stroke

Before

- Check access arrangements are in place at their local pool, particularly if they need assistance getting in or out of the water.
- Getting back in the water might feel intimidating – swimming or exercising with a friend or family member can help.
- Find out about changing facilities – consider if they might need help undressing and dressing.
- Remember that the area around the pool may be wet – care must be taken, especially if they use a walking aid.
- Some people feel self-conscious about their body after a stroke – swimwear that offers more coverage may help them feel more confident.
- If they are experiencing continence issues as a result of stroke, specialised swimwear is available.
- If they are experiencing cognitive issues, e.g. remembering things, it may help to plan ahead. For example consider if it is possible to mark their locker so they can find it easily.

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- Make sure that they are well hydrated before they swim. It is fine to also have a light snack an hour before they exercise.

During

- Explain that if they have any weakness because of the stroke the water can help them move more easily and feel supported.
- If their joints feel stiff, water can offer a gentle stretch to increase flexibility.
- Buoyancy aids such as noodles, floats and swim vests can provide extra support and give them confidence. Check what their local pool has available.
- Encourage a warm up before every session – use activities like marching on the spot in waist high water or gentle leg kicks whilst holding onto the side of the pool.
- Advise that they do some moderate intensity exercise – this means including some swimming, aqua-walking/jogging, or other exercises that increase their heart rate but don't make them so breathless that they can't speak.
- It is also helpful to practice balance and strengthening exercises in the pool. These may include balancing on one leg (with or without eyes closed), squats, lunges and repeated push and glides from the poolside.
- Encourage them to do what feels right for them – even short bursts of exercise can be very beneficial.
- Build up their aquatic activity gradually, aiming to spend a little longer in the water each time.

After

- Advise them to cool down with some gentle activity - this allows their heart rate to decrease gradually.
- They should always leave the pool feeling that they could do more – remember that getting showered, dried and dressed can be quite tiring.
- Once they are dressed, make sure they have a drink to replace water lost during exercise.

Tips for supporting swimmers in recovery from stroke

Do:

- check that they have consulted with their stroke specialist or GP before taking part in any activity.
- encourage them to consult with their physiotherapist if they need advice about adapting the way they swim or exercise in the water.
- encourage them to plan their exercise around their daily routine to reduce fatigue.
- advise them to enjoy their time in the water but stop if they feel any unusual symptoms such as extreme breathlessness, tightness in their chest, dizziness, double vision or nausea.
- encourage them to start off small and build up their swimming or water based exercise at a pace that works for them.
- remind them to make contact with their local pool to find out what extra activities they have available – they may wish to look for swimming sessions with other people who have experienced stroke or other long term conditions.

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- encourage them to aim for 150 minutes of moderate intensity activity every week – swimming and aquatic exercise are great ways to help achieve this.

Specific tips for participating in other disciplines after stroke

Open water swimming (over and above standard open water guidance):

Do:

- encourage them to think about the temperature of the water – cold water may be associated with greater risk, particularly if they are not used to it. Ensure they consult with their stroke specialist or doctor first.
- ensure they consider the accessibility of entry and exit points before entering the water.

If you are swimming abroad:

Do:

- ensure that they take a copy of their prescription and extra medication in case any get lost or stolen.
- encourage them to consider local pool hygiene standards as these may be variable.
- advise them to wait at least two weeks after a stroke before flying.

Additional advice

For more information, please visit the following websites:

- Stroke Association – Getting moving after stroke:
stroke.org.uk/life-after-stroke/getting-moving-after-stroke
- Moving Medicine Patient Information - Stroke:
movingmedicine.ac.uk/consultation-guides/patient-info-finder/?p=adult&c=stroke
- Swim England PoolFinder: swimming.org/poolfinder/

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