Stroke and physiotherapy

What is a stroke?
A stroke is a condition that affects the brain. It’s caused when blood supply to the brain is interrupted, either due to a blockage in an artery or if the artery bursts. The first kind of stroke is called an ischaemic stroke; the other kind is a haemorrhagic stroke. When brain cells have their blood supply interrupted, they die. Brain cells cannot regrow again, but physiotherapy can help to rewire the brain to recover from the damage. This is termed neuroplasticity, and is a focus of rehabilitation with physiotherapists.

What causes it?
It can be difficult to say exactly what causes each person’s stroke. However, we do know that there are some conditions that make having a stroke more likely, such as diabetes or an irregular pulse. Other risk factors are related to diet and lifestyle factors, such as high blood pressure, smoking, and not being physically active.

What are the common signs of stroke?
The signs of stroke will be different for everyone, depending on the area of the brain affected. Some of the common signs are:
- Weakness or numbness of the face, such as the corner of the mouth drooping
- Arm and/or leg weakness
- Slurred speech or difficulty understanding speech
- Dizziness, loss of balance or a sudden fall
- Headache, usually severe and with a sudden onset
- Difficulty swallowing

What does it mean for me?
In Australia, stroke is the leading cause of long-term, permanent disability. However, physiotherapists and other health professionals will work with stroke survivors to help them with their recovery. Physiotherapists are specifically trained to identify movement problems that may be caused by a stroke and can improve important activities such as walking, balance, feeding and participating in leisure activities.

Along with optimising recovery, physiotherapists can also manage a number of common complications that can occur for stroke survivors over the longer term. For example, deterioration of walking ability and falls are common issues. Often stroke survivors experience problems when they are no longer linked into formal therapy services, or because they did not receive formal rehabilitation following a mild stroke or mini-stroke. Physiotherapists can help to address these problems. There’s no ‘wrong’ time to begin seeing a physiotherapist, however the sooner the better.
How can physiotherapists help people following stroke?

Physiotherapists who have a specific knowledge and expertise in the treatment of stroke are called neurological physiotherapists. They are skilled in managing a number of issues which may be encountered by stroke survivors. These include:

- Difficulty walking
- Falls or problems with balance
- Difficulty using the affected arm for everyday activities
- Returning to community and leisure activities
- Falls
- Reduced control of movement
- Loss of sensation
- Spasticity
- Dizziness
- Learning to use walking aids correctly

What treatments do physiotherapists use for stroke?

The approaches used by physiotherapists are considered by the National Stroke Foundation as being among the best treatments for stroke survivors. The best treatments are identified by reviewing the available research, so you can be comfortable that treatment is founded on the best evidence.

There are many different recommended treatments for stroke survivors. The right one for you depends on your clinical needs and the goals of your therapy, which a physiotherapist helps to assess. For example, problems with balance can be addressed with a range of physiotherapy exercises that reduce the risk of falls, and training in specific tasks can improve arm movement post-stroke. Physiotherapists use a variety of approaches to assist with balance, walking speed and motor function (arm and leg movement and strength) to improve your ability to perform daily activities.

Where can you find a neurological physiotherapist?

Neurological physiotherapists can be found in acute hospitals, inpatient rehabilitation units, local community rehabilitation centres, community health centres and outpatient therapy services.

Physiotherapists skilled in treating stroke survivors also work in private practice and may treat individuals in their homes. You do not need a specific referral to see a neurological physiotherapist.

Titled and specialist neurological physiotherapists have undergone further study and have advanced expertise and experience in the area of neurology.

Find the physio for you at choosephysio.com.au

This fact sheet was developed by an APA physiotherapist with particular expertise in this area. With over 24 000 members, the Australian Physiotherapy Association (APA) is the peak body representing the interests of Australian physiotherapists and their patients.

To find an APA physiotherapist near you, visit choosephysio.com.au or call 1300 306 622.

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