

Tip Sheet #4

Recommended lifestyle changes after stroke

What are lifestyle changes for the stroke survivor? What can I do as a caregiver to help?

After stroke, there are several lifestyle changes that a person should make. You as a family caregiver can help.

- Help the survivor stick to a healthy diet.
- Promote physical activity. It can help with recovery.
- Try to help the survivor stay, or work toward, a healthy weight range.
- Help the survivor stop smoking to reduce the risk for another stroke.
- Help them get regular checkups with the doctor, dentist, and eye doctor.

Lifestyle changes can be challenging for a stroke survivor. A lot has already changed because of the stroke. Caregivers need to be gentle in talking with the survivor about healthy behaviors. It is usually easier when both the survivor and the caregiver can work together on common goals. **See Skill-Building Tip Sheet SB7 Goal Setting: Taking Care of Your Health.** This tip sheet covers how to set a goal and create an action plan for a healthier lifestyle. Both the survivor and the caregiver can benefit from this process.



Healthy Diet: A healthy diet is very important to prevent future strokes. Here are some caregiver tips that can help.

Help the survivor choose foods that lower cholesterol

- Read food labels for Total Fat Content. The American Heart Association recommends limiting dietary fat to less than 30% of one's total calories. For example, if the survivor needs a diet of about 2,500 calories per day, then they would want to eat no more than 83 grams of fat per day. Check food labels for the number of fat grams and add them up each day to get an idea of how to limit fat intake.

- Avoid fast food restaurants that serve fried foods.
- Avoid foods high in saturated fat and cholesterol.
- Eat at least 5 servings of fruits and vegetables daily.
- Avoid eating more than 6 ounces of meat, seafood, or poultry per day. Three ounces of meat is about the size of a deck of cards.
- Eat chicken or turkey (without the skin) or fish in most of the main meals.
- Avoid organ meats (such as liver) that are high in cholesterol.
- Choose lean cuts of meat and trim off all the fat before cooking. After cooking, throw away the fat that cooks out of the meat.
- Drink fat-free (skim) milk and eat low-fat dairy products.
- Avoid butter and oils in cooking.
- Use margarine instead of butter and use low-fat salad dressings.

Suggest that the survivor avoid foods that raise their blood pressure

- Use less salt.
- Avoid eating salty foods. The American Heart Association recommends that Americans eat less than 1,500 mg sodium per day. Count the grams of sodium from food labels and add them up to get an idea of how much sodium should be eaten per day.
- Avoid drinking alcohol.

Help the survivor eat healthy: After a stroke, eating can be difficult.

- **Ability to Eat** – If the survivor has trouble eating, it is important to choose foods that are healthy, but are also easy to swallow. **If they have trouble swallowing, notify the doctor.** Don't delay! They may be referred to a speech therapist to help with swallowing problems. Ask the speech therapist what types of foods are easiest for the survivor to swallow. Liquids, solids, pureed foods? See **Tip Sheet #17 Getting the survivor to eat** for more tips.
- **Dental health** – Eating can be difficult because of poor dental health or because their dentures no longer fit properly. Regular checkups with the dentist for teeth cleaning or to refit dentures are important. Daily brushing after meals is important to remove food they couldn't swallow. Electric toothbrushes or toothbrushes with large handles may be helpful.

- **Poor Appetite** – Some survivors don't want to eat. Join the survivor at the table. If they are losing too much weight, choose foods that are high in protein (e.g., meat, eggs, beans), vitamins, minerals and calories. Sometimes nutritional supplements or nutrient-fortified drinks are needed. Some medications make food taste bad, or they fill the survivor up. ***Ask the doctor, nurse, or dietitian for advice.***
- **Length of time** – Many survivors take a long time to eat. Smaller, more frequent meals are often better than 2 or 3 large meals per day. You may need to cut up foods to make them easier to eat.
- **Visual Perception** – Some survivors have trouble seeing part of their plate. They may miss food that is out of their field of vision. Put their food on the side of the plate that they see best.



- **Offer plenty of fluids** – A cool glass of water or other fluids is important throughout the day. Survivors often forget to drink fluids.
- **Medical Considerations** – Special diets may be needed if the survivor has **high blood pressure or diabetes**.
- **Constipation** is also sometimes a problem with stroke. Ask them to drink plenty of fluids and eat foods that are high in fiber (breakfast cereals, fruits, and vegetables). Ask the doctor, nurse, or dietitian if you have questions.



Being Physically Active Helps Recovery: Here are some caregiver tips to help the survivor become more active.

- **Visit therapy sessions to see what the survivor can do.**
- Ask a physical therapist about exercises for the stroke survivor.
- Encourage the survivor to do prescribed exercises.
- Most people should exercise for about 30 minutes per day. Ask the doctor or physical therapist how much the survivor should exercise.
- Break exercise up into small sessions throughout the day. This may help the survivor from getting too tired. Give them choices when to exercise.
- Exercise with the survivor. Set a good example. Exercising together is good for both of you. **See Tip Sheet #19 Helping the Survivor to Exercise** for tips in this area.
- Survivors may move through stages before getting motivated to do prescribed exercises. Find out what stage they are in.
 - **Not ready to change** – Help them see the benefits of exercise.
 - Helps the survivor avoid another stroke
 - Helps them stay strong. They will get weak if they don't exercise.
 - Helps them maintain their weight.
 - Helps them recover more quickly.
 - **Thinking about change** – They know the benefits, help them figure out how to make it part of their day.
 - Figure out the best time of the day to exercise.
 - If possible, take the survivor to the grocery or mall for exercise.
 - Find others to exercise with the survivor.
 - Praise the survivor for trying.
 - **Preparing for action** - They have decided to exercise.
 - Help them make it a priority.
 - Monitor or remind them to do their exercises.
 - Praise the survivor for exercising.

- **Taking action** – They are exercising! Give them positive feedback. Praise them for exercising. Plan for setbacks.
- **Maintaining a good thing** – Continue to give them positive feedback. Help them keep exercise a priority in their life.



Try to help the stroke survivor stay, or work toward, a healthy weight range:

- If the stroke survivor is overweight, talk to the doctor or dietitian about how to reduce their weight with diet and exercise. Work toward a healthy weight.
- If the stroke survivor is at a healthy weight, try to help them stay at that weight and be physically active.
- If the stroke survivor is underweight, talk with a doctor or dietitian. Proper nutrition is very important for stroke recovery.

Try to help the survivor stop smoking:

- Smoking is a major risk factor for stroke, heart disease, high blood pressure, and lung disease. If the stroke survivor smokes, encourage them to quit! If they won't quit, ask them to try to cut down.
- Ask the doctor if they need help quitting. The doctor may prescribe things that can help them quit. You can also contact one of the following organizations.
- Be aware of safety concerns with smoking, especially if the survivor falls asleep easily, or if they have memory problems.



American Cancer Society

1-800-ACS-2345

Internet address: www.cancer.org**American Lung Association**1 800-586-4872 Internet address: <https://www.lung.org/>**National Cancer Institute**

Cancer Information Service

1-800-4-CANCER or 800-422-6237

Internet address: <http://www.cancer.gov/>**Office on Smoking & Health****Centers for Disease Control and Prevention**Internet address: <http://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/>**Nicotine Anonymous**

1-877-TRY-NICA (1-877-879-6422)

Internet Address: www.nicotine-anonymous.org**Smokefree.gov**

(Online materials, including info on state Quitlines)

Internet Address: <http://www.smokefree.gov/>**Regular check ups with the doctor, dentist, and eye doctor should be scheduled:**

- Keeping appointments for regular checkups is important.
- Checkups are needed to see how well the stroke survivor is recovering from the stroke.
- Checkups are also needed to see how well their medications are working. **Remember to bring a list of the stroke survivor's medications with you when you visit the doctor.**

- Checkups are also a good way to get their blood pressure checked, and to see if they have any other risk factors that can be managed to prevent another stroke.
- **Keep a running list of questions to ask the doctor during the next visit.** A notebook and pen next to the telephone is a handy place to write down questions as they pop up. Take the notebook with you when the stroke survivor has their next appointment. It is easy to forget important questions that you had during an appointment. You may also find it helpful to jot down the answers to your questions during your visit as well. A worksheet to write questions and answers is in **Skill-Building Tip Sheet #SB5 Communicating with Health Professionals**.



- **Don't forget to also make an appointment with the dentist every 6 months for teeth cleaning or denture fitting.** Sometimes after a stroke, dentures may not fit as well. Have the dentist check to see if dentures need adjusted. Ask your doctor or therapist when the best time is to refit dentures. It may be best to wait until muscles in the mouth are stronger. Teeth cleaning is especially important because survivors sometimes are unaware that food is left in their mouth after eating. This can cause tooth decay. Regular brushing is important too.
- **Seeing an eye doctor** (ophthalamologist) is also important for the stroke survivor. Poor vision can lead to falls. An eye doctor who specializes in stroke or other neurological disorders may be needed.

When do I need to contact a doctor or other professional about lifestyle changes for the stroke survivor? Anytime that you have a question about lifestyle changes for the stroke survivor.

- Call the doctor or dietitian for questions about a healthy diet.
- Talk with a physical therapist, speech therapist, or doctor about prescribed exercises that you can help the survivor do.

- Talk with the doctor, dietitian, or physical therapist for how to help the survivor reach and maintain a healthy weight.
- Many organizations can help with smoking. Ask the doctor too.
- Go to doctor and dentist appointments with the survivor so that you can ask questions. Attending therapy sessions will help too.

Where can I find more information about lifestyle changes for the stroke survivor?

Take a look at **Skill-Building Tip Sheet SB5. Communicating with health professionals** for ways to get the information you need.

Recommended Books

Senelick, R.C. (2016). *Living with Stroke: A Guide for Patients and Their Families* (Fifth Edition). Birmingham: Healthsouth Press. ISBN 978-1891525186.

Jorgensen, L. (2021). *The Caregiver's Guide to Stroke Recovery: Practical Advice for Caring for You and Your Loved One*. Emeryville, California: Rockridge Press. ISBN 978-1-64876-577-3.