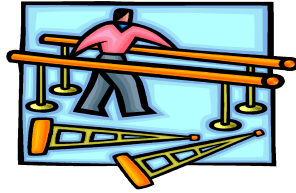


Tip Sheet #20



Learning How to Help the Stroke Survivor Walk, Transfer to a Wheelchair, Move About, or Avoid Falls

Many stroke survivors have hemiparesis. In other words, they are weak or have become paralyzed on one side of their body. This makes walking or moving around very difficult.

The physical therapist is the professional who usually does the most to help the survivor learn how to walk or how to move around after a stroke. **Go to physical therapy sessions with the survivor to see what they are able to do.** This is also a good time to ask the physical therapist how you can help the survivor move around at home. Practice helping the survivor walk or move around with the help of the physical therapist. **Physical therapy is a time of learning for both the survivor and the caregiver.**

Helping the survivor walk or move around is not to be taken lightly. You want to prevent falls or injury to the survivor. You also want to prevent injury to yourself. This tip sheet will give you some general ideas about how to prevent falls and how to safely help your survivor move around at home.



Suggestions for preventing falls or other injuries.

- **Keep the floor clear of clutter.** Make sure there is plenty of room to get around the furniture. Put away clutter. Make sure there is a clear path to the bathroom and kitchen.
- **Clean up spills immediately.** A spilled drink or water on the floor can be very slippery. Tell the survivor if you just mopped. Dry the floor after getting out of the shower.

- **Watch out for loose rugs or other things.** Throw rugs can slip or trip the survivor. Make sure carpet is tacked down well. Watch out for electrical cords or other clutter.



- **Make sure there is plenty of light.** Open drapes. Turn on lights. At night, think about adding nightlights. Hardware or online stores carry small nightlights that plug into outlets. They are not very expensive.
- **Avoid furniture that is too low to the ground or too soft.** The survivor may trip over furniture that is too low, or may have trouble sitting and standing from furniture that is too low or too soft.
- **Ask the physical therapist or nurse about special equipment.** Grab bars in the bathroom shower or around the toilet can be very helpful. The survivor may need a raised toilet seat. Wheelchair ramps may be needed. Doors may need to be made wider. There are many ways that you can make your house easier for the survivor to get around in. Therapists usually know how and have the experience to recommend what should be done and who might be able to do it.
- **Lock the wheels on the wheelchair.** Before getting into or getting out of a wheelchair, make sure you lock the wheels.



- **Wear shoes that fit properly and that have nonskid soles.** A good pair of tennis shoes is usually recommended for stroke survivors. Ask the physical therapist about the best kind.
- **Ask the physical therapist about an ambulation belt (also known as a gait belt).** A good thick leather belt with a secure buckle might work too. Have the survivor wear the belt around their waist. This will make it easier for you to grab them to prevent a fall. The belt will give you better control to help steady the survivor.



- **Don't grab or pull on the survivor's weak or paralyzed arm.** Injury to the shoulder can happen very easily. Support the arm, but don't use that side for pulling or lifting the survivor. Do not place anything in the palm of the survivor's weak hand, unless that object is part of a therapy program. It can cause an abnormal grasp.



- **When standing from a chair, or when getting out of bed, have the survivor get up slowly.** Getting up too fast can make the survivor dizzy, or they may faint. When standing from a chair, have them stand for a few moments before walking. When lying down, have them sit on the side of the bed for a minute or so before getting them to stand up.
- **If the survivor needs your help to get up, be sure that they have a bell or something so they can call you.** If they can't get you to come help them move, they may try to get up on their own. Make it easy for them to ask you for your help in moving around.

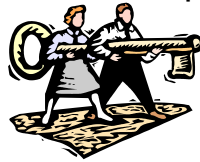


Some stroke survivors wear a “Life Alert” button, or have an emergency alert function on their smart watch (e.g., Apple Watch) that can detect a fall. These can be added resources, especially if the survivor is alone at home. “Life Alert” is just one company that can provide these services. Call 1-800-813-3104 for more information.

Suggestions for helping the survivor walk, transfer to a wheelchair, or move about. The following suggestions are about how to help your survivor move. First, knowledge about good body mechanics is needed so that you don't hurt yourself. Then, suggestions on how to help your survivor walk, transfer to a wheelchair, or move around are given. **Be sure to ask your physical therapist or others involved in the survivor's care to help you learn and practice these skills. Do not try to learn these skills on your own. TRAINING IS IMPORTANT FOR BOTH THE CAREGIVER AND THE SURVIVOR.**

1. **Body Mechanics** – these are principals that help you keep good balance, posture, and alignment while lifting, bending, or moving to help the survivor.

- **Keep a wide base of support.** For example, keep your feet apart while moving or lifting. This will help you keep your balance better.



- **Keep your center of gravity in the middle of your wide base of support.** This means that you want the center of your body over the center of where you are standing. You don't want to be leaning one way or the other.



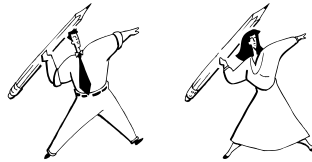
- **Lower your center of gravity when moving or lifting.** This means that you want to squat or lower yourself a bit when you are ready to lift or move the survivor. You will have better balance, and you are more likely to use your leg muscles than your back when you do this.



- **Use your leg muscles when lifting.** Avoid using your back muscles or your arm muscles when doing heavy lifting. Let the large muscles of your legs do the lifting. They are more powerful.
- **Keep objects you are lifting close to your center of gravity.** When lifting an object, keep it close to you. When moving the survivor, get close to them. The closer you are to them, the more strength you will have.



- **Shift your weight from one foot to the other when moving, rather than using your back muscles.** Shifting your weight will help to move the object or person better. Don't leave all the moving to your arms or back.



- **Most importantly, get help lifting or moving if you need it.** It is not worth a painful back injury! Don't lift or move anything or anyone if you think that you might get hurt.

2. **Specific techniques for walking (Don't try to learn these skills on your own. Have the physical therapist or nurse help you learn).**

- Make sure physical therapy has given their OK for the survivor to walk. *Practice helping the survivor walk while the physical therapist is there so they can give you pointers.*
- Remember to put on any braces, or to get any assistive equipment such as canes or walkers ahead of time. Good shoes are important. A strong, leather belt with a secure buckle is helpful.
- Stand on the survivor's weak side
- Put one arm around the survivor at their waist. Hold on to their belt.
- The other arm you can put under the survivor's underarm. Do not grab their weak arm for support. Injury to the survivor's shoulder can occur if you grab their weak arm. *Ask your therapist.*
- Canes are usually used in the strong hand. *Ask your physical therapist to be sure.*

- When going up stairs, the strong side goes first. When going down stairs, the weak side goes first. Easy way to remember stairs: up with the good, down with the bad!! Remember to have the survivor hang on to the railing. Consider adding railing on both sides of the stairway.



3. **Specific techniques for transferring from bed to wheelchair** **(Don't try to learn these skills on your own. Have the physical therapist or nurse help you learn).**

- Have the survivor put any braces or slings on ahead of time. Also, have them put on their shoes.
- Have the survivor put on a leather belt with a secure buckle, or an ambulation belt if the survivor has one.
- Position the wheelchair at a 45 degree angle to the side of the bed on the survivor's strong side. ***Lock the wheelchair.***
- Help the survivor sit up on the side of the bed. Give them a minute or two before standing. Have them scoot to the edge of the bed so that both feet are on the floor.
- Have the survivor lean forward, then stand. Support them by holding their belt. Be sure that your feet are wide apart so you have a wide base of support.
- The survivor needs to lead with their strong side.
- When sitting down, have them reach back and grab the chair. This is so the survivor can lower himself or herself into the chair.

4. **Specific techniques for moving the survivor up in bed** **(Don't try to learn these skills on your own. Have the physical therapist or nurse help you learn).** If the survivor is too low in their bed, here's how you can help them move up.

- Put a pillow at the head of the bed so they don't bump their head

- Put the head of the bed down if you have a hospital bed. Otherwise, remove all other pillows.
- Have the survivor bend their legs.
- Slide one of your arms under the survivor's shoulder blades
- Slide your other arm under the survivor's hips
- Squat down or lower your center of gravity
- Make sure you have a wide base of support. Spread your feet apart.
- Move the survivor by shifting your weight from one foot to the other. Do not use your back or arm muscles. Have the survivor help by pushing with their good leg.
- ***You might also consider adding a “draw sheet”*** or extra sheet folded so that it just fits under the survivor's shoulders and hips. Grabbing the draw sheet to help scoot the survivor up in bed helps. If you have another person to help you, have that person stand on the other side of the bed and grab the draw sheet. Both of you can then move the survivor up in bed. **Be sure to shift your weight and use your leg muscles, not your back.**
- ***If you need to change the sheets while the survivor is still in bed,***
 - roll the survivor to one side,
 - roll the dirty sheets up along the survivor,
 - make that half of the bed with new sheets,
 - roll the survivor back over to the other side
 - remove the old sheets,
 - make the rest of the bed.

- Make the survivor comfortable.
- Get help if you need it!!! Don't take the risk of hurting yourself.



When do I need to contact a professional?

- Talk to your doctor, nurse, or physical therapist if you have **any** questions or concerns about helping the survivor walk, transfer, or move around. The physical therapist is the best person to ask about how to move the survivor without getting hurt. **See Skill-Building Tip Sheet #SB5. Communicating with Health Professionals** if you need some tips on getting the information you need.
- **Call your doctor or call 911 if your survivor falls.**