



# When your loved one has had a stroke

By Audrey Miller, MSW, RSW, CCRC

*A stroke can be very traumatic. It often occurs suddenly, and the resulting damage can range from mild to severe. A person who has had a stroke will most often be admitted to a hospital for assessment and possible rehab; after which, the person will be discharged home. So how can you prepare for your loved one's return home?*

First, it's important to understand what has happened. A stroke occurs when blood flow to the brain is stopped or blood vessels going to the brain are ruptured, causing the affected area of the brain to die. Ideally, people recognize initial warning signs of a stroke such as weakness, trouble speaking, vision problems, headache and dizziness and go to the emergency department immediately for an assessment.

## Discovering the severity

Many people who have a stroke recover all or most normal function, but others can be quite disabled and be unable to move, speak or eat normally, and others in the most severe cases can die. The area of the brain where the stroke occurs is largely responsible for the person's disability and subsequent recovery.

## Recovery at home

Following treatment in hospital, which may include rehabilitation, your loved one will be discharged home. To prepare for their arrival, there are

three areas that you can review: the home environment, and their physical and emotional care.

## A safer environment

Making the home more "stroke friendly" can help your loved one to recover. Ask yourself such questions as, "Is your loved one now using a walker or wheelchair?" or "What modifications to your home may be needed to ensure accessibility and safety?" Here are a few steps you can take:

- Contact an occupational therapist to set up an in-home safety assessment.
  - If you need special devices, the hospital social worker or a geriatric care manager can help you find funding from your provincial ministry of health, social services, or your private health insurance.

Local organizations such as the March of Dimes and Veteran's Affairs may also help.

- Ensure that assistive devices are in place, such as grab bars in the washroom.
  - Your local government home care provider (in Ontario, the CCAC/ Local Health Integration Network) should be your first point of contact to arrange the in-home assessment. Alternatively, private companies offer this service.
- Shop for helpful items.
  - For example, long-handled reachers, modified eating utensils and writing equipment. Some hospitals and pharmacies and most medical supply stores will sell these types of equipment.
- Modify clothing and shoes.

Between 40,000 to 50,000 Canadians have a stroke each year.

Every year, about 15,000 Canadians have a transient ischemic attack (TIA), also known as a mini-stroke. However, many TIAs go undetected; therefore, this statistic is likely an underestimate.

Stroke is the fourth leading cause of death.

Source: Heart and Stroke Foundation

- Use Velcro® ties rather than laces.
- Avoid clothes that have buttons.
- Avoid tight-fitting sleeves, arm holes, pant legs and waistlines, and clothes that have to be put on over a person's head.

If you are helping someone get dressed who has had a stroke, always tell the person what you are doing first.

### Physical care

- Your doctor can recommend an exercise program or refer you to a physiotherapist.
  - This can also be arranged through the local community care centre or at a hospital on an outpatient basis.
  - In-home private physiotherapy can also be arranged.
- The hospital may have recommended speech therapy, as many individuals

who have experienced a stroke require exercises to re-tune the muscles in their mouth.

- This may be arranged via the hospital or a community based clinic.
- Your loved one may have several medical/therapy appointments that may require your attendance. If so, look for community-based agencies that offer rides, at a reduced rate, to medical appointments.

### Emotional care

- Set realistic goals for yourself and your loved one.
- Appreciate that they may be feeling frustrated and that improvements take time.
- Understand you can't do everything yourself and that tasks or exercises may need to be repeated.
- Join a support group. These groups

are a great way to share experiences with others who understand.

- Utilize local resources to make caregiving easier. Contact services in your community such as your local Heart and Stroke Foundation, local community centres or hospitals.
- Look after yourself. If you are feeling overwhelmed, talk to your doctor, friend, counsellor or social worker.

A stroke will impact each family differently, but how you and your family respond to this challenge will determine how your loved one adjusts to life following stroke. To do your part, stay informed, ask questions, and never be afraid to ask for help. ●

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