

Returning to work after a stroke

The aim of this leaflet is to provide general advice and tips on returning to work following a stroke.

Introduction

Strokes affect people in different ways, depending on which area of the brain has been affected and the extent of damage caused. Going back to work can be a big change, so planning ahead with the right care, support and advice can help.

How can a stroke impact work life?

Every stroke is different, and every recovery is different. Below are some examples about how stroke can affect you when back at work:

- **Cognitive effects:** difficulty concentrating, remembering things or solving problems. It might be more challenging to plan and organise tasks that were previously effortless.
- **Physical effects of stroke can include:** weakness in arms and legs; it can cause reduced mobility, balance and co-ordination. You can also experience handwriting difficulties.
- **Communication problems:** this can include difficulties speaking and understanding, and reading and writing. Other communication problems can be due to weak muscles in the face.
- **Emotional changes:** a stroke is sudden and everyone deals with this adjustment differently. People often experience feelings of anger, frustration, low mood and depression. This can make returning back to work overwhelming.
- **Fatigue:** examples include feeling tired, having a lack of energy, having no motivation and being unable to keep up with normal routine. This isn't like typical tiredness and does not always improve with rest. Fatigue is a 'hidden' effect of stroke and people may need support managing their energy levels.
- **Changes in your vision:** about two thirds of people experience visual problems that can be mild to severe. This can include blurred vision, double vision, difficulty focusing and visual field loss.
- Some effects of stroke are not obvious to others and sometimes these 'hidden' effects may not be apparent until you are back at work.

Tips for planning your return to work

The best thing to do is to have open, regular communication with your employer so they can support you back to work. Helpful information to give could be: the date of your stroke, your likely date of discharge from hospital and a date that you'll be back in touch with them to discuss how you're recovering.

When is the right time to return back to work?

Timing is important. It is not helpful to rush back to work too quickly following a stroke despite potential financial or career pressures. It is important to only return when you feel well enough, have received the right support and have a plan in place with your employer on your return.

Things to consider:

- Physical demands of the job – what will you be doing on a daily basis? Can you continue to meet the demands of the job? Is the workplace suitable for your needs?
- Cognitive demands. Can you concentrate on all aspects of job requirements? Do you have skills for planning/ organising/ problem solving?
- Emotions – controlling feelings in the workplace, maintaining appropriate professional relationships with colleagues.
- Transport – how do you get to and from work? Does your job involve driving?

When you're ready to consider returning to work:

- Discuss a return to work plan with your employers prior to starting.
- If your workplace has an Occupational Health Department or Human Resources Department, contact them as they can provide you with appropriate support and advice.

Coping with post-stroke fatigue:

- Monitor levels of tiredness. Are you more tired in morning or afternoon?
- Pace. Break down 'heavy' tasks into smaller ones and spread them out during the day.
- Prioritise. Identify the most important tasks and complete these first.
- Plan. Think ahead, organise your day / week.
- Consider more frequent breaks to help beat fatigue

Financial support if you are unable to return to work immediately:

- Check with your employer about their policy for pay during your sickness absence or you may be entitled to Statutory Sick Pay, which is the basic level of sick pay set by the UK government.
- If you are self-employed, contact your local Citizens Advice Bureau for relevant information.
- Check any personal insurance policies you may have. These might pay out in the event of a serious illness or loss of earnings.
- Fit note: liaise with ward doctors or your GP to get one.
- The Stroke Association charity will also be able offer signposting and advice.

If unable to return to work you may be entitled to claim:

- Universal Credit: which includes payments for people out of work, on a low income, or with an illness or disability.
- Personal Independence Payment (PIP) is designed to help meet some of the extra costs of long-term ill-health or disability. It is not means-tested, so you can claim it while you are working.
- You may be eligible for council tax discounts and grants.
- You can also contact your local Citizens Advice for individual advice.

Access to work

This is a UK government scheme that provides practical advice and support for people and their employers to allow individuals to find or stay in work if you have a disability. This can assist with funding of adapted equipment, support workers, transport to work or coaches to work one-to-one on things like building memory strategies or support workers input.

If you have any questions in regards to returning to work, please speak to your ward occupational therapist.

Contacting us

Acute Stroke Unit Tel: 0118 322 8274

To find out more about our Trust visit www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk

Please ask if you need this information in another language or format.

Occupational Therapy Team / Acute Stroke Unit, April 2023

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