

Physiotherapy Aids Stroke Survivors

The physiotherapist is a key member of the Stroke Rehabilitation Team. Ideally, physiotherapy should be initiated as soon as possible following a stroke when it may help to prevent problems relating to immobility, such as stiffness of joints or pain.

A physiotherapy assessment will determine specific treatment, which will vary greatly depending upon the severity and type of stroke. Researchers have discovered that brain cells can reorganize themselves after damage, a phenomenon known as neuroplasticity. Regardless of the specific goal of treatment, the key to success in rehabilitation is repetition and intensity of practice.

To facilitate recovery of lost function, the therapist will use neuromuscular training techniques. This involves repetitive rehearsing of desired movements using such things as sensory stimulation, positioning and imagery. Often following a stroke, motor control is decreased. For example, the stroke survivor may be able to clench but not open the fist, or move the whole leg but not move the foot independently. Through physiotherapy training, clients gradually can regain control and improve function and mobility.

Physiotherapists work with the survivor, family and caregivers to set goals that are realistic and meaningful. A goal may be independence in personal care, walking, resuming social activities or returning to work. The physiotherapist in conjunction with the rest of the rehabilitation team, can focus on ways to help individuals achieve these personal goals.

At the end of the formal rehabilitation, the survivor is encouraged to continue a home exercise program to help maintain strength and to promote

continued improvement. In many cases the recovery from stroke is a very long process that outlasts the formal rehabilitation process.

For success over the long term, stroke survivors may wish to become involved with appropriate ongoing community programs. The physiotherapist can help the survivor and family to connect with community resources which could include day programs, support groups, pool or land exercise classes or assistance in returning to or developing new and meaningful hobbies or interests.

For more information about how to access physiotherapy services in your area, contact the Guelph-Wellington Chapter of Stroke Recovery Canada at 519-822-5111.