

# Eating Well After A Stroke

Information for patients



## Introduction

Eating well after a stroke is key to your recovery. A good diet can help reduce the risk of further stroke or heart attack. It can help you manage your weight and blood pressure, and help you have the energy and strength to get the most out of rehabilitation. Successful rehabilitation after stroke not only means taking medication and engaging in therapy, but also following a healthy lifestyle, including eating:

1. Plenty of fruit and vegetables
2. Less saturated fat (and total fat dependent on your weight)
3. Oily fish
4. Less salt

## Fruit and vegetables

People who eat lots of fruit and vegetables have a lower risk of further stroke or heart disease.



**Fruit and vegetables are a good source of many nutrients that are protective for your body. They have many benefits:**

- Vitamins which help protect your body against harmful diseases such as stroke, heart disease and cancer
- Minerals which keep your bones healthy
- Potassium which plays a role in blood pressure control
- Fibre which keeps your bowels healthy and helps control cholesterol levels
- They are low in calories and can help with weight loss

**What is a portion?**

It is important to have a variety of fruits and vegetables in your diet to ensure you get the range of nutrients your body needs.

A portion of fruit or vegetables generally equates to a small handful (approximately 80 g); for example, one medium fruit (e.g. apple), two small fruits (e.g. plums), two to three tablespoons of vegetables, a large bowl of mixed salad, or 150 ml of fruit juice, or 30 g dried fruit (one heaped tablespoon).



*Tomatoes*  
1 medium tomato



*Oranges*  
1 orange



*Bananas*  
1 medium banana



*Strawberries*  
7 strawberries



*Kiwis*  
2 kiwis



*Peppers*  
½ a pepper



*Asparagus*  
5 spears



*Avocado*  
½ an avocado

Fruit juice, smoothies, and beans and pulses can only contribute a maximum of one of your five per day, no matter how much you have.

## Eating five portions of fruit and vegetables a day is recommended.

If you eat one or two portions with each meal and occasionally snack on fruit, you might be surprised at how easy it is to eat five-a-day.

### **At breakfast:**

Add a heaped tablespoon of dried fruit to your cereal or drink a glass of fruit juice or both.

### **Mid morning:**

Keep a well-stocked fruit bowl at home and work so you can eat fruit before lunch, if hungry.

### **At lunch:**

Have a side salad with your lunch, or try vegetable soup or vegetable chilli and jacket potato.

### **Evening meal:**

Add vegetables or pulses to curries, casseroles or stir-fries. Serve at least two vegetables with your fish, chicken or meat. Use fruit as a dessert: fresh, stewed, baked or pureed.

## Fats and cholesterol

There are two main types of fat: **'saturated'** and **'unsaturated'**.



### Saturated fat

- Saturated fats are often referred to as **'bad'** fats
- Eating foods that are high in saturated fat are a major factor that can contribute to raising cholesterol levels in the blood. This can then result in the arteries becoming clogged up which potentially increases the risk of further strokes or heart attacks. This process is called atherosclerosis
- Most people in the UK eat too much saturated fat
- Foods high in saturated fat include: meat pies, sausage rolls, pastries, cakes, biscuits, processed meats (e.g. burgers), fatty cuts of meat, butter, ghee, lard, cream, hard cheese and foods containing coconut or palm oil. Some ready meals can also be high in saturated fats

### Unsaturated fat

- Unsaturated fat is often referred to as a **'good'** fat
- Including unsaturated fats, especially monounsaturated fats in the diet can actually help to reduce cholesterol levels. It is recommended that foods containing saturated fats are replaced with foods that are high in monounsaturated fats
- Foods high in monounsaturated fat include: oily fish, avocados, nuts and seeds, olives, corn, walnut and rapeseed oils and spreads and vegetable oils



## Total amount of fat

In addition to replacing saturated fats with unsaturated fats, if you are trying to reduce your weight, it is also important to reduce the total amount of fat you eat. You can do this by:

- Cutting down on fat or oil that is added to food in cooking. Try microwaving, steaming, poaching, boiling or grilling, instead of roasting or frying
- Trimming the fat off meats, choosing lean cuts of meat and choosing low fat varieties of dairy products and spreads (or eat just a small amount of full fat varieties)
- Cutting down on snacks high in fat i.e. cakes, biscuits, pastries, chocolate etc.

## Fibre and cholesterol

Eating a diet that contains soluble fibre could also help to reduce the amount of cholesterol in your blood. Good sources of soluble fibre include oats, beans, peas, lentils, chickpeas, fruit and vegetables, wholegrain cereals and wholegrains

## Foods containing cholesterol

- The cholesterol we get from our food has much less effect on the level of cholesterol in our blood than the amount of saturated fat we eat
- Some foods naturally contain cholesterol such as liver, kidneys, eggs and prawns

Foods containing cholesterol can form part of a well-balanced diet after a stroke; for example, a poached, boiled or scrambled egg daily is fine.

## Cholesterol lowering products

- Plant sterols and stanols can be found in specially developed products such as some spreads, yoghurts and drinks. They are aimed at people who need to lower their cholesterol levels
- Often, these products are expensive and not routinely recommended. The suggestions above are a more effective and affordable way of reducing cholesterol

## Omega 3 fats

The main benefit of including oily fish in your diet is that it contains omega 3 fats which have been shown to lower the risk of heart and blood vessel disease. Omega 3 fats can help prevent clots, lower levels of blood fats and also help to regulate heart rhythm. Oily fish is also an excellent source of protein and contains nutrients which are important for healthy bones and skin.

Eating two portions of fish a week (one of which is oily) will provide enough omega 3 fat to have a beneficial effect. Oily fish includes: mackerel, salmon, pilchards, sardines, herring, fresh tuna, kipper and trout.

## A portion is:

100 g (4 oz) of fresh, frozen, smoked fish or canned fish such as sardines, pilchards or mackerel.



1 small tin  
(approx 100 g)



½ medium tin  
(approx 200 g)



¼ large tin  
(approx 400 g)

Small amounts of omega 3 fats are found in other foods, including dark green leafy vegetables, sweet potato, unsalted nuts and rapeseed oil.

## Salt

### How much?

The average amount of salt eaten is currently 9.5 g a day. We should be having much less, just 6 g a day. This includes salt already found in foods.

About 75% of the salt we eat is already in the food we buy. Processed foods such as ready meals, sauces, baked beans, soups, crisps, salted nuts, take-aways, pizza and smoked foods are all high in salt.



**Below are examples of the average salt content of common take-aways:**

<b>Pizza:</b>	9.45 g
<b>Chinese:</b>	8.1 g
<b>Kebab:</b>	6.2 g
<b>Indian:</b>	4.7 g

Some individual meals however, contain significantly more salt; for example, a single portion of beef and black bean sauce with fried rice can contain up to 27 g of salt.

### **Why cut down?**

Eating too much salt can raise blood pressure, which triples the risk of stroke, at any age. Evidence shows that eating less salt reduces blood pressure, especially as part of a healthy diet including plenty of fruit and vegetables.

### **How?**

Almost everyone eats at least some processed foods such as bread, cheese and tinned foods. You don't need to stop eating these but eating them less frequently or replacing them with alternatives will make a difference

## High salt lunch

- Cheese and salami sandwich and crisps = **4.2 g**
- Two slices of white bread spread with butter
- Two slices of salami
- One cheese slice
- One packet of crisps

## Low salt lunch

- Egg and Cress sandwich, yoghurt and fruit = **1.5 g**
- Two slices of wholemeal bread spread with low fat spread
- One egg sprinkled with cress
- One low fat yoghurt
- One apple

Try to reduce the amount of salt gradually and let your taste buds adapt. Herbs and spices, vinegar and lemon juice can be used to flavour food instead. Try not to add salt during cooking or at the table.

Reading labels and choosing foods that contain less salt can make a big difference. The traffic light system that is found on many packaged foods can make this easier. If a product is green for salt, this tells you that the product has a low salt content. If the traffic light system is not available, the back of packaging generally provides nutritional information. 0.3 g of salt or less per 100 g of product would be classed as a low salt product.

## Weight and shape

The risk of stroke goes up as body weight increases. This is especially true for people who carry extra body fat around the waist ("apple shaped"). Extra weight puts extra strain on the whole body, increasing the risk of diabetes, high blood pressure and high cholesterol. Maintaining a healthy weight or reducing your weight by 10% if you are overweight, not only reduces the risk of stroke, it also reduces the risk of heart attacks and many cancers.

### Healthy waist

You are at increased risk of health problems if your waist circumference is:

**Men:** greater than 94 cm / 37 inches

**Women:** greater than 80 cm / 31.5 inches

### Check your weight and shape

Successful weight management is a long-term challenge. It is best to lose weight steadily, 2 kg (approximately 4 lb) per month is currently recommended. A successful approach to weight loss should take into account any barriers which prevent you from making the changes you need to follow a healthier lifestyle. Start by setting yourself small and achievable goals which reduce the calories in your diet from alcohol, fat and sugar.

# Alcohol

It is a good idea to check with your doctor if you are allowed alcohol, as it may interact with some of your medications and may increase your risk of falls.

## How much (maximum 14 units per week)?

Men and women are advised not to drink more than 14 units per week on a regular basis. Spread your drinking over 3 or more days if you regularly drink as much as 14 units in a week.



1 single measure of Gin  
**1 Unit**



50ml Sherry  
**1 Unit**



Pint of Larger ABV 5.2%  
**3 Units**



175ml White Wine ABV 13%  
**2.3 Units**



275ml bottle of Alcho Pop ABV 5%  
**1.4 Units**



Pint of Cider ABV 5.3%  
**3 Units**



500ml Can of Larger  
**1.9 Units**



Pint of Bitter ABV 5%  
**2.8 Units**

## Why cut down?

Drinking above the recommended amount can increase blood pressure. It can raise the level of both cholesterol and triglyceride (types of fat in the blood), increasing your risk of heart disease or a further stroke. Alcohol is also high in energy which can increase your weight. Excessive drinking can also trigger atrial fibrillation, a type of irregular heart beat.

## Questions and answers

### How can I cook when I feel so tired?

Fatigue is common following a stroke and it may affect your ability to prepare and cook your meals. To ensure you continue to eat well some of the following ideas may help:

- Cook larger meals and freeze portions for use on days when you are too tired to cook
- If you have a family member or friend nearby, ask them to make meals that can be stored in the fridge or freezer
- Use pre-prepared fruit or vegetables, or chose frozen or canned varieties such as mixed vegetables, peas or tinned fruit in juice
- Ready meals can save time, energy and food wastage. Look for healthy options that are low in saturated fat and salt.
- Keep a good supply of basic foods in your store cupboard / freezer for when you may be unable to get to the shops e.g. tinned sardines or tuna, tinned / frozen fruit and vegetables, breakfast cereals, cereal bars, crackers and plain biscuits

## **What about keeping active?**

This will depend on how the stroke has affected you. You may need to adapt your activities or try new activities. If you are seeing a physiotherapist, you should discuss any suitable activities with them. If you are able, examples of exercises you may be able to do include: swimming, walking, exercise classes or everyday activities such as gardening or housework. If your mobility has been severely affected, you may find chair-based exercises more suitable. Being active for 30 minutes, five times per week can reduce the risk of a stroke. You don't have to do it all in one go; it can be broken down into smaller sessions e.g. 3 x 10 minute sessions.

## **What should I do if I have diabetes?**

People with type 2 diabetes are at higher risk of having strokes and heart attacks so it is very important to keep your diabetes well-controlled.

Following a healthy diet as described in this booklet; taking regular exercise, losing weight if you are overweight and taking your diabetes tablets or insulin regularly will all help. You should have your long-term blood test called Hba1c measured at least once a year so you know what your overall diabetes control is like.

If you have type 1 diabetes, good diabetes control is still very important to reduce your risk of having any more strokes and this is best managed by being on the right amount of insulin for the carbohydrate foods you are eating. A diabetes dietitian can help you with this. The dietary advice in this booklet should still be followed for heart and stroke health.

If you have any concerns about your blood sugar levels, please discuss with your GP or diabetes specialist nurse.

### Why don't things taste right?

Following your stroke, you may find that your sense of taste and possibly smell, is affected. This can be distressing and make meal times difficult. It is important to continue eating. Try some of the following ideas to help improve meal times:

- Keep your mouth fresh and clean by brushing your teeth regularly and drinking plenty of fluids
- Choose a wide variety of foods and pick ones that taste good and leave those you dislike. Do not try and eat foods that taste unpleasant even if they are your usual favourites
- Try to make meals look as attractive as possible
- Avoid foods that are very cold or very hot
- Sharp tasting foods and drinks are refreshing, and may help stimulate taste buds
- Try adding more seasoning, herbs and spices in cooking such as garlic, chilli powder, lemon juice and vinegar
- Chewing sweets such as mints or boiled sweets can help refresh your mouth. Try low sugar varieties, if you have diabetes

## Should I avoid any foods with my medication?

If you are taking Simvastatin (to help lower cholesterol), you should avoid grapefruit and grapefruit juice. Grapefruit increases the concentration of Simvastatin in the bloodstream, meaning there is a higher risk of side-effects. Do not worry if you eat some grapefruit or drink some grapefruit juice by mistake, as the concentration of Simvastatin will go back to normal within a few hours and is unlikely to cause any long-term damage.

If you are taking Warfarin (to stop clots forming in the blood), you should avoid cranberry juice. Cranberry juice can increase the effect of Warfarin meaning you are at a higher risk of bleeding. If you are taking Warfarin, avoid eating large quantities of foods high in vitamin K such as broccoli, spinach and cabbage. This is because vitamin K can prevent Warfarin from working.

## Plan for change

To help me eat well, I am going to make the following changes:

### Example

I am going to increase the fruit I eat from one portion to two portions per day.

1.

2.

3.

## Further information

For further recipe or meal ideas, see:

### **Leeds Lets Change**

Web address: [www.leedsletschange.co.uk](http://www.leedsletschange.co.uk)

### **British Heart Foundation**

Web address: [www.bhf.org.uk](http://www.bhf.org.uk)

Contact telephone number: **0300 330 3322**

### **Stroke Association**

Web address: [www.stroke.org.uk](http://www.stroke.org.uk)

Contact telephone Number: **0300 303 3100**

### **NHS Choices**

Web address:

[www.nhs.uk/livewell/Pages/Livewellhub.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/livewell/Pages/Livewellhub.aspx)

### **Change 4 Life**

Web address:

[www.nhs.uk/Change4Life/Pages/healthy-eating.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/Change4Life/Pages/healthy-eating.aspx)

Contact telephone number: **0300 123 4567**

For advice on alcohol information, please see:

**Drink aware**

Web address: [www.drinkaware.co.uk](http://www.drinkaware.co.uk)

Contact telephone number: **0207 766 9900**

For information on diabetes, please see:

**Diabetes UK**

Web address: [www.diabetes.org.uk](http://www.diabetes.org.uk)

Contact telephone number: **0345 123 2399**

## Contact details

This leaflet has been produced by Dietitians working in Stroke at Leeds Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust and Leeds Community Healthcare NHS Trust, June 2015.

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