

A complete guide to stroke for employers



Stroke Helpline: 0303 3033 100
or email: helpline@stroke.org.uk

This guide can help you to support an employee returning to work after a stroke.

At the Stroke Association, we recognise the value that stroke survivors add to our workplace. This guide can help you support people with disabilities or different needs after a stroke. Your organisation can celebrate diversity, and benefit from the contribution of those with different life experiences.

This guide is aimed at employers. Stroke survivors can get more information in our guide 'A complete guide to work and stroke'.

If you have a question that is not answered in this guide, visit stroke.org.uk or call our Helpline.

What is a stroke?

A stroke is a brain attack. It happens when the blood supply to part of your brain is cut off. Blood carries essential nutrients and oxygen to your brain. Without blood your brain cells can be damaged or die.

Strokes affect people in different ways, depending on the part of their brain that is damaged. A stroke can affect the way your body functions as well as your thought processes and how you feel and communicate.

Stroke occurs more than 100,000 times a year in the UK; that's around one every 5 minutes. It is also a leading cause of disability in the UK, and almost two thirds of stroke survivors leave hospital with a disability. Many people think that strokes only happen to older people, but stroke can strike anyone at any time. Younger people can have strokes too, including babies and children.

One in four strokes in the UK happen in people of working age. With the right support and guidance, many people successfully return to work after a stroke.

Our 10 golden rules for employers

A stroke can dramatically change someone's life and your employee will need your support. They may be experiencing emotional, mental or physical changes. They may also be worrying about their financial situation and find themselves navigating an unfamiliar benefits system.

Here are our golden rules to help you support them the best you can.

1. Timing is important

Often people just want to get back to 'normal' after a stroke, so it can be tempting to rush back to work. But if people return to work before they or their employers are ready, it can lead to problems further down the line.

On the other hand, too much of a delay can affect someone's confidence and make it more difficult when they do come back. Getting the timing right isn't easy. Some people realise they have tried to return too soon, and might need more time or support before trying again.

The best thing to do is to stay in touch with your employee and plan for their return together. This will help you understand what support they need and give you time to put it in place before they come back, which should make it much easier for both of you.

2. Ask the expert

Every stroke survivor is an expert in their own needs. So don't be afraid to ask your employee about the best way for you to support them. Start by being open and supportive. Let them know that their needs are important. And keep talking. It can take time to become aware of all the different changes that happen after a stroke. So your employee may not have all the answers straight away and things are likely to change as time goes on.

3. Listen

It's really important to set up clear, open channels of communication with your employee as soon as possible, so you can understand how their stroke has affected them. Listen without judgment to what they tell you. Ask questions to make sure you understand and have all the information you need.

4. Don't make assumptions

No two strokes are the same, just like no two people are the same. Some people will have visible disabilities (such as problems walking) but for others their disabilities may not be visible (such as problems with concentration). These 'hidden' disabilities can make it difficult to know that someone needs support. That's why it's important to ask and listen.

5. Respect their privacy

Be sensitive to your employee's right to privacy. They may not wish to disclose their disabilities or the fact they have had a stroke. Ask them if they would like to let other colleagues know. Then decide together the best way to do this.

6. Check guidelines and policies

Find out if your organisation has policies in place for long-term illness or absence. Familiarise yourself with these and speak to the relevant teams in your organisation such as Human Resources and Occupational Health for additional guidance. If the person is unable to return to work, ensure that the right processes and clear communication are in place, to ensure a fair outcome for employer and employee.

Check to see what financial support your employee is entitled to receive, such as sick pay and health insurance. Make sure you give information as promptly as you can, so your employee has enough time to respond, and present it in a way that is clear, open and easy to understand.

7. Ask about support

Your employee may be able to get financial or practical support via Access to Work. Your employee may also be receiving support from an NHS occupational therapist (OT) who can help them decide when they are ready to return to work. Your employee may be able to put you in touch with their OT, so they can help you understand how the stroke has affected your employee and answer any questions you may have.

8. Create a return-to-work plan

Arrange ways to keep in touch while your employee is away from work. Once they are ready, meet to create a plan for returning to work. This can include the number of days they will work each week, working times and hours.

Most people find that a phased return, which allows them to gradually build up their working hours, helps them to get used to working again. Whether they can return to their previous hours depends on their individual needs and the support available.

You should also review the tasks that they do and any changes that need to be made to them. It's also a good opportunity to update your employee on any team or organisational changes that may have happened while they've been away from work.

9. Trial and review

Your employee's needs are likely to change as their recovery continues. Set regular times to review the arrangements you've agreed. Be honest about what is or isn't working and encourage your employee to do the same. Be as flexible and creative as you can. Your reviews don't have to be formal meetings, you could have a weekly chat over a coffee. Do keep notes, as this can help you both see the person's progress as well as any problems that need to be addressed.

10. Be flexible

It's likely that your employee will continue to have appointments with health professionals once they return to work. You should try to allow time off for these appointments as they can help the person's recovery. They also help the person to maximise their contribution to your workplace. Some organisations have a medical and disability leave policy.

FAQs

What is a reasonable adjustment?

The Equality Act 2010 states that a disability should not stop someone from working or having the same rights and access to opportunities as other people. The legal definition of a disability in the UK is a physical and or mental impairment that has a substantial and long-term effect on your ability to carry out daily activities. This includes the emotional and cognitive problems due to a stroke.

As an employer you have a duty to make 'reasonable adjustments' for employees with disabilities. A reasonable adjustment is an alteration to the workplace or the way a disabled person does their job in order to allow them to work. This may mean changing their work times or providing specialist equipment to help them with certain tasks. Employees cannot be made to pay for reasonable adjustments.

Other examples of reasonable adjustments are:

- Changing duties and targets, and adapting processes.
- Arranging work shadowing or 'buddying up' with a colleague.
- Adapting equipment or making other changes to the work environment.
- Working from a different location or from home.
- Changing working hours and working patterns.

Reasonable adjustments do not have to be expensive or complicated. It's about looking at the barriers a person is experiencing and thinking creatively about removing them. Some adjustments can be made in advance such as new equipment, but others will be made with the person as they find out what changes they need to help them fulfil their role.

The adjustments you can make will also depend on the size and finances of your organisation. So it may be that you can't accommodate all the adjustments your employee needs. However, with an open and collaborative approach you'll be able to decide together what adjustments you can realistically and fairly make. The acas website has more information [acas.org.uk](https://www.acas.org.uk).

More information about your duties as an employer under the law and about protecting your staff from disability-based discrimination can be found at [equalityhumanrights.com](https://www.equalityhumanrights.com).

What is a phased return?

This means that your employee would return to work on a part-time basis and gradually build up their hours. It may help to change working times, such as a later start to avoid commuting in the rush hour. It may take time to return to the amount of hours they were working before, and they may not be able to return to their original hours, so be as flexible as you can.

Many people find a phased return helps them readjust to working again. It could also have benefits for you, as it makes the return more likely to be a success. It also gives you the chance to see what's working and assess any changes that may be needed.

What is Access to Work?

This is a UK government scheme that provides practical advice and support for people with disabilities or health conditions to allow them to find or stay in work. It offers an initial workplace assessment, where an adviser can look at the workplace and the tasks that your employee needs to do. They will then make recommendations for additional support that could help.

This could be adapted equipment, coaches to work one-to-one on things like building memory strategies or a support worker to assist with basic manual tasks. The scheme can also help with transport to work. See 'Other sources of help and information' for contact details.

The effects of stroke

How well someone recovers from a stroke depends on many factors, including how quickly their stroke was treated and the support and therapy they received afterwards. People can make excellent recoveries and even if they're left with problems, these can continue to improve over time. With the right help and adjustments in place, they can continue to make a valuable contribution to your workplace.

It's important to remember that everyone's experience of stroke is different. So the best way to understand how your employee has been affected is to ask them.

There are effects of stroke you can't see

Although your employee may look physically fine, they could still be coping with other difficulties like fatigue, cognitive problems or emotional changes. Very often people aren't aware of these effects until they are back at work.

The best thing to do is to have open, regular communication. Some stroke survivors struggle to talk about their difficulties or may not wish to, so you'll need to be as supportive and patient as you can. Ask questions and encourage your employee to do the same.

“Even though people at work have heard the word stroke, they didn’t really know about the different types of effects a stroke can have. After reading this guide I really felt they understood my hidden disability better.”

Communication problems

Some stroke survivors experience speech and language problems. It can include difficulties with speaking and understanding, and reading and writing. This is called aphasia.

Other types of communication difficulties can be due to weak muscles in the face, or problems with concentration.

How can you help?

- If your employee is having difficulty speaking, you need to give them time. Try not to interrupt: with enough time they’ll be able to answer for themselves.
- Remember that your employee’s intelligence has not been affected, just their ability to use and understand language
- Read our guide ‘Helping someone with communication problems’ for more tips and advice.

Cognitive problems

A stroke can affect the way your brain understands, organises and stores information. This can make it difficult to concentrate, remember things or solve problems. Problems with concentration and short-term memory are especially common after a stroke.

How can you help?

- Written instructions or a reference guide could be useful for someone who has short-term memory problems. Instructions for using the phone or the photocopier, for example, could be helpful, so that your employee doesn’t feel they have to keep asking the same question.
- Keep verbal or written instructions clear and concise and try not to overload them with too much information at once.
- Reducing distractions and allowing for regular breaks can often help to improve concentration.

Emotional changes

A stroke is sudden and shocking, and affects every part of your life. It's a lot to deal with, and everyone deals with it differently. The anxiety and frustration that it causes can sometimes make people feel that they're unable to cope.

How can you help?

Frequent reviews will help both you and your employee. This will allow you to catch issues early on and implement any changes that are needed.

- Check to see if your organisation can offer any counselling or emotional support.
- Encourage your employee to talk to their GP about emotional support and counselling or find out about services they can refer themselves to. Our Stroke Helpline can tell them more.
- If possible, offer a room or private space where the person can rest if they feel overwhelmed.

Physical effects

A stroke can have any number of physical effects. It can cause weakness or loss of movement in an arm, leg or down one whole side of the body. As well as affecting someone's mobility, this can also cause a great deal of pain. A stroke can also affect vision, balance and coordination.

How can you help?

- You may need to make some adaptations to your employee's work space – they may need a more supportive chair, for example.
- Make sure that the things they need are within easy reach and that there is plenty of room to move around, to minimise the risk of falling.
- If they are having problems with their vision, then they may need written information provided in a different way.

Fatigue

Many people have problems with fatigue after a stroke. This isn't like typical tiredness, it doesn't always improve with rest and it isn't directly related to how busy or active you've been. Fatigue is a 'hidden' effect of stroke, but it can be a major barrier for people returning to work. They may need support to manage their energy levels and ensure they can do their job as well as possible.

How can you help?

- Regular breaks may help your employee to manage their tiredness. A later start time can also be helpful.
- If possible, offer a room or private space where they can take a break.
- Read our guide 'Fatigue after stroke' for more tips and advice.

Where to get help and information

From the Stroke Association

Helpline

Our Helpline offers information and support for anyone affected by a stroke. This includes friends and carers.

Call us on **0303 3033 100**, from a textphone **18001 0303 3033 100**
Email helpline@stroke.org.uk.

Read our information

Get more information about stroke online at stroke.org.uk, or call the Helpline to ask for printed copies of our guides.

My Stroke Guide

The Stroke Association's online tool My Stroke Guide gives you free access to trusted advice, information and support 24/7. My Stroke Guide connects you to our online community, to find out how others manage their recovery.

Log on to mystrokeguide.com today.

Other sources of help and information

Acas

Website: acas.org.uk
Helpline: **0300 123 1100**
Text Relay service: **18001 0300 123 1100**

Information and advice for employers and staff on all aspects of workplace relations and employment law.

Access to Work (England, Scotland, Wales)

Website: gov.uk/access-to-work
Telephone: **0800 121 7479**
Textphone: **0800 121 7579**
Provides advice and support for both you and your employee. Your employee can apply either online or over the phone.

Access to Work (NI)

Website: nidirect.gov.uk/articles/access-work-practical-help-work
The Access to Work scheme for Northern Ireland. To apply, your employee will need to speak to an Employment Service Adviser at their local Jobs and Benefits Office or JobCentre.

Disability Rights UK

Website: disabilityrightsuk.org
Email: enquiries@disabilityrightsuk.org
Helplines for different topics including students and discrimination, and disability confidence training for employers.

Equality and Human Rights Commission

Website: equalityhumanrights.com
Advice line: **0808 800 0082**
Has information for employers about your duties under the law and making reasonable adjustments. The Scotland section of the site gives information about the additional considerations public sector employers in Scotland need to consider.

Fit for Work

Website: [fitforwork.org](https://www.fitforwork.org)

Adviceline: **0800 032 6235** (English)

0800 032 6233 (Welsh)

Provides advice on returning to work for employees, employers and GPs.

Healthy Working Lives Scotland

Website: [healthyworkinglives.scot](https://www.healthyworkinglives.scot)

Adviceline: **0800 019 2211**

Information and advice about employees returning to work.

Headway

Website: [headway.org.uk](https://www.headway.org.uk)

Helpline: **0808 800 2244**

Email: helpline@headway.org.uk

A charity for people who have had a brain injury. They have information about returning to work for employees and employers.

About our information

We want to provide the best information for people affected by stroke. That's why we ask stroke survivors and their families, as well as medical experts, to help us put our publications together.

How did we do?

To tell us what you think of this guide, or to request a list of the sources we used to create it, email us at feedback@stroke.org.uk.

Accessible formats

Visit our website if you need this information in audio, large print or braille.

Always get individual advice

This guide contains general information about stroke. But if you have a problem, you should get individual advice from a professional such as a GP or pharmacist. Our Helpline can also help you find support. We work very hard to give you the latest facts, but some things change. We don't control the information provided by other organisations or websites.

© Stroke Association 2019
Version 3. Published October 2019
To be reviewed: September 2022
Item code: **A0141CG**

Every five minutes, stroke destroys lives. We need your support to help rebuild them. Donate or find out more at stroke.org.uk.

The Stroke Association is registered as a charity in England and Wales (No 211015) and in Scotland (SC037789). Also registered in the Isle of Man (No. 945) and Jersey (NPO 369), and operating as a charity in Northern Ireland.