Information for patients from JNNP

Exercise may protect against stroke damage

People who exercise regularly make a better recovery and are less disabled if they suffer a stroke, new research suggests. Although the findings are only preliminary, it seems like another good reason to be physically active.

What do we know already?

We know that exercise helps to keep your weight, blood pressure, and cholesterol level under control. Being active may play a part in protecting people from heart attacks and strokes. Researchers have now looked at whether people who exercise regularly make a better recovery if they do suffer a stroke.

What does the new study say?

The study looked at 673 people who'd had a stroke. They were asked about how much exercise they'd done before they became ill. About half exercised less than once a week. Around 3 in 10 did moderate physical activity between one and three times a week, and about 2 in 10 were more energetic, exercising four times a week or more.

The researchers looked at how disabled people were by a stroke. They looked at whether people could feed, bath, and dress themselves, and how mobile they were. People were given scores on several different scales, and the scores were compared based on the amount of exercise people had been doing before their stroke.

Immediately after a stroke, people who'd done more exercise were less disabled, judging by their disability scores.

At first the benefits of exercise appeared to last for three months after a stroke, but the long-term advantages mostly disappeared once the researchers took into account people's ages, weights and whether they smoked or not. For example, people who did less exercise tended to be older, so it may have been their age rather than lack of exercise that stopped them making a good recovery.

How reliable are the findings?

The authors describe the study as ‘exploratory’, and it is a fairly small, preliminary piece of research. We can't be sure of the results without confirmation from larger studies.
Where does the study come from?
The study was carried out by researchers at a number of universities in the USA.

What does this mean for me?
The findings of this particular study aren't conclusive, but we know exercise helps to keep people fit and healthy. Exercise improves the tone of arteries, improving blood and oxygen flow around the body. It seems likely that being fitter could help the body withstand the effects of a stroke.

What should I do now?
Official advice in the UK says that all adults should try to do 30 minutes of moderate exercise, about five days a week. Moderate exercise means something strenuous enough to make you sweat a little and make your heart beat faster.
If you’re worried about your stroke risk, talk to your doctor. Lifestyle changes and medicines can cut your chances of having a stroke.

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http://jnnp.bmj.com/cgi/content/full/80/9/1019

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