

Information for patients from JNNP

Can healthy living help after a stroke?

What do we know already?

People who've had a stroke tend not to live as long as other people. We know that a healthy lifestyle helps most people to live longer. But studies haven't looked at how lifestyle affects the length of life of people who've had a stroke, or which lifestyle factors are most important.

This new study used data from a big health survey done every few years in the US. The study focused on the people in the survey who'd had a stroke, and looked at five important factors for a healthy lifestyle:

- ⤴ Eating five or more fruit and vegetables each day
- ⤴ Exercising for at least 12 hours each month
- ⤴ Having a healthy weight
- ⤴ Drinking alcohol in moderation
- ⤴ Not smoking.

The researchers checked whether people were alive six to 12 years after they'd taken part in the survey, and cross-referenced this information with their lifestyle factors.

What does the new study say?

Two factors – not smoking, and taking regular exercise – were strongly associated with being alive at the end of the study, regardless of all other factors. But the researchers found that the more healthy lifestyle factors someone had, the better their chances.

People with four or five healthy lifestyle factors were more likely to be alive at the end of the study than people who had only one or two healthy lifestyle factors. And one or two healthy factors meant people were more likely to be alive than having no healthy lifestyle factors.

How reliable are the findings?

The information in the study came from a big, well-respected survey of health and lifestyle, so it should be fairly reliable. This type of study can't prove that particular lifestyle factors help people to live longer, because we can't be sure that other factors aren't responsible. For example, people who are able to exercise regularly are likely to be less disabled from their stroke than people who don't exercise. So the severity of the stroke might be the reason for someone living longer, rather than the exercise. The researchers tried to take account of some of these factors in the study, but there may be some that were missed.

What does this mean for me?

If you've had a stroke, you will have a lot of things to get to grips with, including recovering from the illness and taking medicines to reduce the chances of having another stroke. But this study shows that keeping up with healthy lifestyle choices like exercise and not smoking is likely to help you to live longer.

What should I do now?

If you struggle to live a healthy lifestyle because of disability from stroke, you could ask your physiotherapist or occupational therapist for help in devising exercises to keep you fit, or ways to prepare healthy meals.

Towfighi A, Markovic D, Ovbiagele B. Impact of a healthy lifestyle on all-cause and cardiovascular mortality after stroke in the USA. *J Neurol Neurosurg Psychiatry* 2012;**83**:146–151. <http://jnnp.bmj.com/content/83/2/146.full>

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