

Stroke in younger people

Although stroke is much less common in younger people it does occur, even in children. Many of the recovery processes described elsewhere in this book apply, but inevitably some things are different.

Children

- Parental and family/whanau support is particularly important when stroke occurs in the youngest age group
- Emphasis should be placed on explaining the stroke and its consequences in a way that is appropriate and easily understood. With young children, hopeful matter-of-factness (no matter what the parents are feeling) will help to reassure – the child will take their cue from how adults are responding to the situation
- Therapy may need to continue for a long time. Try to find ways to make therapy more appealing, more 'fun', and to integrate it in as normal a lifestyle as possible, eg, swimming practice could be part of belonging to a swimming club with parallel participation in club social activities
- Ensure that teachers and schoolmates have adequate information about the stroke and its effects, so they can be supportive. Teasing, shunning and misplaced disciplining are the result of ignorance, so make a point of identifying problem areas and ask a social worker or Stroke Foundation field officer to provide enough explanation so that the child's classmates and teachers have an understanding of how the stroke is affecting daily life
- It is also helpful to advise the child how to respond directly to questions or taunts about their disabilities (and to explain how their schoolmates might be motivated by fear rather than malice)

- At the same time, don't be overprotective. A stroke is going to present difficulties and these must be overcome rather than avoided
- Brothers and sisters of the child may feel 'left out', especially in the early days, or have unexpressed worries about the stroke. Make time to give siblings special attention and reassurance, repeating information as often as necessary
- Contact with other families in a similar position is beneficial for the whole family
- The Stroke Foundation field officer will liaise with the school, and link you up with families who can provide support and advice from their own experience with stroke.

Teenagers

The psychological implications of stroke have particular importance in this age group. Most healthy teenagers find it hard to cope with feeling 'different' and the differences that a stroke makes can seem especially difficult.

- Altered body image and perception of attractiveness are issues that can present more problems than physical disability; counselling can be of great value
- Family/whanau support is essential, but peer-group support may be more crucial at this age. Contacting and sharing experience with other teenage stroke patients should be encouraged (ask the Stroke Foundation field officer to help arrange contact), as well as participation in a normal social life
- Education and work training are of vital importance, for both self-esteem and successful rehabilitation. Teachers and employers should be given a thorough background to stroke, as well as explanation of the particular problems and needs of the young person (the Stroke Foundation field officer will undertake this if you wish)

- The demands of entering relationships, establishing a career, encountering the challenges of adult life impose special needs. Teenagers with a stroke may need to actively seek 'bursts' of additional therapy or specialised counselling as indicated by life situations.

Young adults

When a younger adult has a stroke, problems of family, finances and social implications may be accentuated.

- Childcare in particular may present difficulties for women. A specific rehabilitation programme and enough support should allow a mother to breastfeed, bond with and care for a baby
- The children of a parent who has had a stroke need ongoing explanation and reassurance. It may take some time for them to come to terms with the new situation, and initially they may reject the parent
- For both partners, seeking information about intimacy and sexuality at an early stage can avoid unnecessary fears and psychological complications
- Interaction with other families in a similar position is very helpful for information sharing, practical advice and support, but it is also important to keep up former contacts and to lead as normal a social life as possible
- Some stroke clubs cater more to the needs of younger people (enquire at the Stroke Foundation)
- When the partner of a younger stroke patient is the caregiver, having adequate 'time off' and opportunity to pursue their own life interests becomes especially important.

