



**EATING WELL  
AND STROKE**



# WHY IS IT IMPORTANT FOR PEOPLE TO EAT WELL FOLLOWING A STROKE?

Eating a healthy, balanced diet is vital for maintaining good health for us all.

Good nutrition can help an individual to maintain and improve strength, remain mobile and stay independent; however illness and old age can put a strain on the body.

Being well nourished is important in recovering from a stroke. Many people who have had a stroke, however, find it more difficult to get the food and drink they need in the right balance. A stroke can result in a number of changes, both emotional and physical, that can make eating and drinking more challenging. Depending on the individual, these changes can result in the need for different ways of eating and drinking, or changes to the types of foods and drinks that can be taken.

As a carer this can be overwhelming and you may find it reassuring to understand how you can help the person you care for to eat and drink well.

There are some simple ways that can help a person who has had a stroke to enjoy healthy, balanced meals and get the best from their diet.

This booklet is for anyone caring for a person following a stroke and provides useful information and tips on how to help them eat well.

# WHAT IS A STROKE?

A stroke occurs when the blood supply to part of the brain is suddenly interrupted or damaged. The stroke stops oxygen being delivered to that part of the brain, causing damage and some brain cells to die.

The consequences of a stroke can be widespread and many stroke survivors will face long-term challenges. It can take a year or even longer to make the best possible recovery. In severe cases, a stroke can cause long-term disability.

The damage caused to the brain during a stroke can impact on many aspects of someone's life and wellbeing. Some of the possible consequences include:

- **Physical/ mobility problems** – weakness and paralysis of an arm, leg or both, muscle tightness, difficulty walking, and changes in sensation such as taste, hearing, touch and sensitivity to pain.
- **Cognitive problems** – short term memory loss or slower than usual speed at which memory is used, reduced attention or ability to focus on a task, or difficulty interpreting information.
- **Communication problems** – difficulty in understanding what is being said and problems with articulating or pronouncing words correctly, reading and writing.
- **Visual problems** – partial or complete loss of vision, or difficulties moving the eyes.
- **Swallowing difficulties** – known as 'dysphagia'.
- **Fatigue and extreme tiredness.**
- **Emotional problems** – depression, anxiety, personality changes and anger.

# HOW CAN STROKE AFFECT DIET AND NUTRITION?

There are various ways in which a stroke can affect a person's diet and nutrition. As a carer, it is important to look out for any issues that might be affecting someone's ability to eat and drink. If reduced intake continues over time, it can affect the way in which the body works, possibly reducing weight, strength, mobility and well-being.

## FACING UP TO NEW PHYSICAL CHALLENGES

A stroke can reduce mobility depending on the part of the brain it affects. This might mean the person you are caring for finds it hard to move their arms and hands, or might not have very good movement of the mouth. As a result they might struggle to get food from their plate to their mouth or they might find it hard to stop food falling out of their mouth.

As a carer, you may need to assist in feeding the person you are caring for or they may require special equipment, such as modified plates and cutlery, to assist them to eat and drink by themselves.

## PROBLEMS WITH SWALLOWING (DYSPHAGIA)

About half of people who have had a stroke will suffer from dysphagia. Many people's ability to swallow will recover within one month of suffering a stroke, however others will experience dysphagia longer than this, and some never regain full swallow function.

Dysphagia is a serious condition and can place people at much greater risk of chest infections due to food and fluid entering the airways and lungs instead of the stomach. There is also a risk they may not eat or drink enough, which could lead to dehydration or malnutrition.

There are several options if the person you are caring for has dysphagia to ensure they get enough nutrition in a safe manner. A Speech and Language Therapist will make recommendations about what is best.

Some people will be considered unsafe to swallow any foods and fluids, and will be placed 'nil by mouth'. In this instance, the nutrition they need may be fed through an enteral feeding tube. The tube may be passed through their nose, called a nasogastric tube, or straight into the stomach, known as a gastrostomy. As their carer, you may be required to set up the enteral feeds at home and you should receive training about how to do this from a nurse or other healthcare professional.

Those who are able to swallow, but with some difficulty, may be required to make changes to the texture of their foods and/or the thickness of their drinks. Softer and pureed foods can make it easier and safer to swallow. Drinks that are thickened move more slowly in the mouth and are less likely to go down the wrong way. Commercially available thickening powders will be prescribed, as required, by the GP. As a carer it is important to closely follow the recommendations which have been made by the Speech and Language Therapist or Doctor when preparing food and drinks. It is important that you seek further information if you have any questions or concerns.

If someone is able to swallow, but is not able to eat and drink enough to meet their nutritional needs they may require a combination of food and fluids taken orally, and feeding via a tube. If this is required, a dietitian will provide instructions about when and how to feed the person you care for.

## GETTING OUT AND ABOUT

After a stroke, many people will have difficulty with things they were previously able to do and they may require more assistance. For example, they may not be able to get to the shops or prepare meals for themselves. As their carer, you may be required to assist in preparing their meals, taking them shopping, or purchasing foods on their behalf.

## COMMUNICATION CONCERNS

Communication difficulties can affect someone's nutrition in a number of ways, including making it harder for them to communicate the types of foods they do, or do not, wish to eat.

During their stay in hospital, healthcare professionals may develop tools or aids for communication, such as picture boards or always having a pen and paper close by.

As their carer, it is important to be patient when communicating with the person you care for and to take the time to listen or use aids to determine what it is they are trying to say. It can be tricky to get it right. Sometimes offering something small and simple that you know they will eat can help mealtimes be less stressful.

## DEALING WITH DEPRESSION

It is estimated that up to half of people who survive a stroke will experience depression at some stage. Depression is more than feeling a bit low and can be very serious. If the person you care for is suffering from depression, it can reduce their ability to cope and their enthusiasm for eating and drinking.

Caring for someone with depression can be a difficult task and sometimes feels overwhelming. You should not feel alone and can arrange to speak to their GP who can provide support and expert advice.

You can provide support for the person you care for by ensuring they always have access to something to eat and by giving them encouragement when you can.



# EATING WELL FOR PEOPLE FOLLOWING A STROKE

Eating well includes eating foods from all of the different food groups to provide the body with the nutrients it needs. This is particularly important for a person who has had a stroke, whether their diet remains unchanged or whether they require some modifications.

## WHICH FOODS ARE IMPORTANT FOLLOWING A STROKE?

There are some recommendations about which foods should be included as part of a healthy diet to reduce the risk of having another stroke.

- [Plenty of fruit and vegetables](#) to provide a good source of vitamins and minerals.
- [Twice weekly intakes of oily fish](#) to provide a good intake of fish oil, which is rich in omega-3.
- [Reduced salt intake](#) through avoiding adding salt during cooking and choosing low salt or salt reduced options, for example canned fish in spring water rather than brine or fresh or frozen vegetables rather than canned.

# TIPS TO ENCOURAGE EATING

Here are some practical ways to improve the nutritional intake of the person you care for if this is a concern:

- Encourage small, frequent meals and snacks every 2-3 hours.
- Include foods that are high in calories and protein, for example meat, fish, and full fat dairy products (like yoghurt and cheese).
- Offer snacks such as cakes, custards, and cooked fruits.
- Provide nourishing drinks based on milk, such as Complan, to increase energy and protein intake.

When preparing meals for someone with dysphagia it is important to always follow the advice the Speech and Language Therapist has given regarding the texture and consistency of food and drinks that are required.

# STAYING HYDRATED

Dehydration is a common concern for people following a stroke, particularly those who have dysphagia. Dehydration can have serious consequences and can occur when someone does not drink enough fluid or eat enough food with high water content. We should all aim to drink 8 glasses of fluid each day.

People with dysphagia are known to limit their drinking, which may be due to concerns about choking. As their carer, it is important to ensure you are preparing drinks to the correct consistency and encouraging them to drink regularly throughout the day. Thickening and offering drinks you know they enjoy can help increase their drinking. Additionally, you can offer foods that contain some fluid as well, such as custard, yogurt, pureed fruit, and soup, which can help maintain hydration.



# WHAT HAPPENS WHEN FOOD IS NOT ENOUGH?

Eating a healthy, balanced diet plays a key role in keeping the body strong. Having a stroke can result in a number of concerns that can make it hard to get enough food.

## WHAT IS MEDICAL NUTRITION?

Medical nutrition products are specialised foods designed to meet the nutritional needs of those living with a medical condition, recovering from an illness or operation, or those who have become weak and frail over time. They are often referred to as Oral Nutritional Supplements (ONS) and are typically used for those who find it difficult to get adequate nutrition from a normal diet alone.

The nutritional composition of ONS is based on extensive scientific and clinical research, and in many cases its use is recommended in international and professional guidelines. Products are generally available in the form of a powder or liquid drink containing energy, protein, vitamins and minerals.

Medical nutrition products are usually prescribed by a healthcare professional and must be used under medical supervision

## WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF ORAL NUTRITIONAL SUPPLEMENTS AVAILABLE?

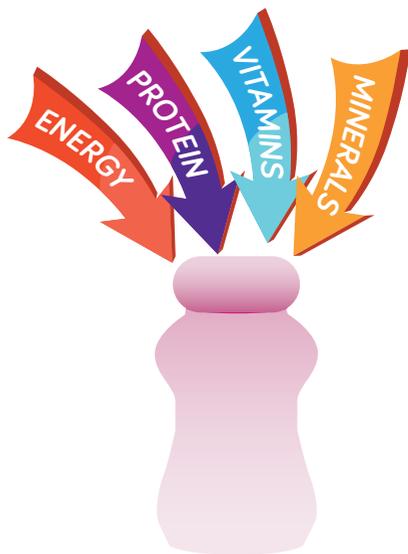
ONS are available in a variety of formats and styles, including milkshake-, juice-, yogurt-, and dessert-style, as well as a variety of flavours to suit different taste preferences.

**Pre-thickened oral nutritional supplements** are available for people with dysphagia who are having difficulty meeting their nutritional needs. These nutritional supplements can make it easier to get the energy and nutrients needed at the correct consistency they require.

## SPEAK TO THEIR GP

If you are worried the person you are caring for is struggling with a normal diet, the practical tips within this leaflet can help improve nutritional intake with food. You could also ask a pharmacist whether a nutritional drink in a powdered format, such as Complan, available from supermarkets and pharmacies, is a suitable option alongside normal foods and drinks. However, should you continue to be concerned about the nutritional intake of the person you care for, please speak to their GP or other healthcare professional about your concerns and whether medical nutrition is right for them.

Further information can be found at [www.carersuk.org/nutrition](http://www.carersuk.org/nutrition) or by calling the Nutricia helpline on 0845 250 1011.



# ABOUT CARERS UK

## HOWEVER CARING AFFECTS YOU AND YOUR FAMILY, WE'RE HERE

As the UK's only national membership charity for carers, we're a supportive community and a movement for change.

We give expert advice, information and support.

We connect carers so no one has to care alone.

We campaign together for lasting change.

We innovate to find new ways to reach and support carers.

Visit our website to join us, support us or get information and advice on caring:

**[www.carersuk.org](http://www.carersuk.org)**

Carers UK Helpline: **0808 808 7777**

(Monday to Friday, 9am-6pm)

**[advice@carersuk.org](mailto:advice@carersuk.org)**

# ABOUT NUTRICIA

Nutricia Ltd specialises in the delivery of medical nutrition products and services for all who need it, spanning from the very young to the elderly. We supply high quality feeds, equipment and support services to patients and healthcare professionals. Through our Nutricia Homeward service we deliver feeds, feeding pumps, equipment and nursing care direct to patients' homes.



Carers UK is working in partnership with Nutricia Ltd to help improve understanding about nutrition and caring. The partnership provides carers with information and resources on nutritional care for both themselves and the person they care for.

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Carers UK includes Carers Wales, Carers Scotland and Carers NI — visit our website to find out more and get in touch: [www.carersuk.org](http://www.carersuk.org).

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