

Recovery From Stroke Can Begin Immediately

A stroke occurs when blood flow and therefore oxygen to an area of the brain is cut off. Generally there are 2 ways this can happen. If a blood vessel in the brain becomes blocked (an ischemic stroke, the most common type) or if a vessel bursts (a brain bleed or hemorrhagic stroke). Typically ischemic strokes are not painful, hemorrhagic strokes usually are.

With either type brain cells are deprived of oxygen and begin to die. When brain cells die abilities controlled by that area of the brain are lost. Nearly three-quarters of all strokes occur in people over the age of 65. As we age the risk goes up.



Every minute counts when it comes to stroke. Medications can be given in a hospital that in many cases can reverse an ischemic stroke but they must be given within the first three hours of the onset of symptoms. Emergency surgical intervention may be necessary to stop bleeding into the brain during a hemorrhagic stroke. With either type quick action and early treatment usually makes a profound difference for a person's health and recovery. Unfortunately, one study showed that in the US the median time to emergency department admission was 16 hours after onset of stroke symptoms.

You need to **B.E. F.A.S.T.** and call 911 immediately if you experience any of these symptoms and suspect a stroke.

- Body:** dizziness or sudden loss of balance or coordination
- Eyes:** sudden extreme vision impairment in one or both eyes
- Face:** sudden facial weakness, or uneven smile
- Arms:** the person cannot raise both arms evenly
- Speech:** impaired, slurred, repeating simple phrases is difficult
- Time to call 911**

According to Bob Dennis, PHD, 2-time stroke victim (a survivor/thriver) and author of **Stroke of Luck**, in many cases rehabilitation can actually begin immediately after the ambulance arrives! The key is optimizing brain plasticity, also known as neuroplasticity, a term that refers to the brain's ability to change and adapt as a result of experiences.

Neuro refers to neurons, the nerve cells that are the building blocks of the brain and nervous system, and plasticity refers to the brain's flexibility. Up until the 1950s, researchers believed that significant changes in the brain could only happen during infancy and childhood. By early adulthood, it was believed that the brain's physical structure was mostly permanent.

Modern advances in imaging technology allowed researchers to get never-before-possible looks at the brain's inner workings, proving that the brain is often able to rewire and repair itself following damage – a type of neuroplasticity. Further, the brain continues to create new neural pathways and



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alter existing ones in order to adapt to new experiences, learn new information, and create new memories.

Dr. Dennis says that the ambulance drivers (EMTs) who came to help him following his stroke administered a series of rapid assessment tests, asking him to touch his index fingers together, point at things, read random texts and signs, repeat simple words and phrases etc. Each time he was handed off to someone new in the hospital he was given more simple tests, some the same, some new.

While waiting and being wheeled from room to room in the hospital he continued practicing the movements, reading random signs aloud, reciting the rhythmic phrases etc., immediately encouraging and pushing his brain's natural inclination to circumvent the damaged areas and develop new pathways to get the jobs done. Dennis said: *"Several doctors took note that my performance had improved markedly over the few hours since my arrival at the hospital and mentioned this observation to their residents and interns as an example of the benefits of simply exercising immediately after a stroke."*

Natural post-stroke neuroplasticity (adaptive rewiring) seems to taper off after 6 or 12 months unless the patient consciously sustains the effort to learn and expose themselves to new experiences and mental and physical challenges. Dr Dennis is quite sure that in some ways he has exceeded a 100% recovery due in large part to his immediate and sustained efforts to challenge and improve his mind. Other beneficial factors he mentions are: deep breathing, sufficient high quality sleep, exercise, and dietary supplements.



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- Lisa Ward, GP



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