

MEMORY LOSS AFTER A STROKE

We all forget things from time to time. However, many people who have had strokes suffer more severe memory problems, which can cause inconvenience and embarrassment. Here are answers to some common questions on memory loss.

Memory problems are very common after stroke, with the majority of patients being affected to some degree. However, the severity of the memory difficulties can vary dramatically. Problems can range from difficulty with short-term memory, which is very common, right through to total memory loss (amnesia), which affects only a small group of people. People whose stroke has affected the right side of the body are more likely to have difficulties with verbal memory (e.g. remembering names). People whose stroke affected the left side of the body usually have trouble with visual memory (e.g. remembering faces).

The severity of the memory problem will depend on how much damage the stroke has caused.

What types of problem are most common?

Several types of memory problem are common after stroke. Many people have difficulty remembering new information. This results in problems with learning new names, addresses and telephone numbers. Another common memory problem affects the speed at which a person can recall something. After a stroke, many people find they are much slower at remembering things. A less common problem causes people to forget things that happened before the stroke, leaving them with gaps in their memories of the past. A person may have no memory of a particular event or may have memory gaps which cover a number of weeks, months or years.



HEAD OFFICE

65 North Castle Street, Edinburgh EH2 3LT

Tel: 0131 225 6963 Fax: 0131 220 6313 Advice Line: 0845 077 6000

E-mail: admin@chss.org.uk Website: www.chss.org.uk

Scottish Charity No. SCO18761

What causes the problem?

Memory is a complex process. For it to function effectively, the brain needs to take in information, store it and retrieve it as and when it is needed. Many different brain cells are involved in the process and they all need to be healthy for memory to function properly. When a stroke happens, some brain cells involved in memory can be damaged or die.

Does memory ever come back?

Many people recover their memories completely – although whether or not this happens will depend on the severity of the stroke. After a less severe stroke, memory often returns gradually over a period of weeks or months. However severe the stroke, most improvement in memory will take place within the first two years and it is often unrealistic to expect further progress after this time.

Is there any treatment?

There is no specific medication to help people with memory loss. Ideally, anyone who is suffering from significant memory difficulties should be referred to a clinical psychologist who can identify specific memory problems and suggest practical ways of coping. It is easier to get referred to a clinical psychologist in some areas than others. Ask your GP for advice on the situation in your area. Many people find the simple memory games, which can be practised at home, can help improve their memory. For example, hide objects around the house and write a list of where you have put them. Try to memorise your list. The next day, see if you can remember where the objects are without referring to your list.

What is the best way to cope?

Your carer, relative or friend can help you assess how your memory problems affect your day-to-day life. The carer should watch to see how the person is coping with the memory difficulties. Is the person remembering to turn the cooker off? Is he or she forgetting to lock the doors? Once the problem areas have been identified, simple methods can often be worked out to tackle them.

Simple tips to aid your memory

- Try to keep to a fixed routine, doing set things at a set time of day
- Write everything down in a diary. Set an alarm clock or watch alarm to remind you to look at your diary
- Try not to tackle too many things at once. Stick to one or two tasks
- If something needs doing, try to do it immediately
- If you have to remember something, repeat it to yourself several times and then go over it in your mind at regular intervals
- Use 'prompts' to jog your memory. For example, leave letters which need posting beside the front door so you see them when you go out
- Leave messages around the house. For example, stick a large piece of paper on the front door reminding you to turn the cooker off and lock the door whenever you go out
- Try to make a habit of always putting things away in the same place so you can label objects to remind you where they go
- When you are introduced to someone new, repeat his or her name several times at natural points in the conversation. This should help the name to stick in your mind.

Further Information

Thinking and behaviour issues after stroke available from Chest, Heart & Stroke Scotland on (0131) 225 6963.

If you would like to speak to one of our nurses in confidence,
please call the Chest, Heart and Stroke Scotland Advice Line

Monday - Friday 9.30am - 12.30 and 1.30pm - 4.00pm

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