

ORGANIZATION NEWS

Information/Education Page

Returning to Work After Mild Stroke



Nearly half of all strokes are considered mild strokes.¹ Even though people with mild stroke may have minimal or no difficulty with everyday tasks like getting dressed or following a morning routine, they may have greater difficulty with more complex everyday activities like returning to work.² Although mild stroke affects each person differently, many people report some changes in their ability to:

- move arms and hands quickly and with good coordination
- move legs and feet quickly and with good coordination
- think quickly and clearly³⁻⁵
- see clearly
- speak and/or understand information
- maintain physical and mental energy and stamina⁶
- manage emotions^{3,5}

This Information/Education Page provides information to people who have had a mild stroke and are thinking about returning to work. It also provides information on resources, services, and alternatives to returning to work, if resuming your previous job is not possible.

What is return to work?

Return to work can have different meanings to different people. In this Information/Education Page, we describe return to work as (1) returning to paid employment and/or (2) returning to volunteer work (unpaid). You may be returning to a previous position or starting a new position. In

addition, your workload may be part-time or full-time.

After a mild stroke, it is important to carefully consider how your abilities have changed since the stroke, the type of work you wish to do, your financial needs, and your personal goals.

When returning to work, it is important that you are able to carry out essential job duties.⁷ Some people go to rehabilitation before attempting to return to work. Other people who have had a mild stroke find that gradually returning to work is helpful. For example, someone may work half days 2 times a week until they feel more confident and comfortable returning to a full workload.

Health care and community providers who specialize in return to work can support your return to work goals by collaborating with both you and your employer to develop an individualized return to work plan.

Why is it important to return to work?

Did you know that returning to work may actually help you with some of your recovery after a mild stroke? Studies have shown that working can help you maintain and even improve your brain health and thinking skills.⁸

Work also provides structure to your day and provides opportunities to socialize with other people. People who return to work after a mild stroke often find that they experience health improvements, have better social relationships, and report greater quality of life.^{3,9} In addition, most people find that getting paid and having employer-provided benefits like health insurance are necessary.

However, if return to paid employment is not an option or a desired goal, remaining active and

Table 1 Common problems after stroke and potential work accommodations

Work-Related Problems Common in Mild Stroke	Potential Accommodations
Oversensitivity to external stimuli such as noise or lights	Private office, desk light instead of overhead fluorescent lights
Difficulty concentrating when there is noise and/or distractions	Quiet work area, headphones, or ear plugs
Difficulty resuming tasks if interrupted	Uninterrupted hours
Needing longer time to process information and instructions	Getting written instructions for all assignments, ability to record meetings, extended deadlines
Difficulty remembering details	Assistive technology such as the use of a notebook or smartphone to take notes, written checklists
Difficulty completing more than 1 task at a time	Organizing tasks into smaller steps, job sharing
Delays in recognizing errors in work and problem solving	Flow charts, regular reviews with assigned colleague or mentor
Difficulty staying organized and meeting deadlines	Assistive technology such as the use of a smartphone at work to remind you of deadlines and meetings
Not being able to work as long due to mental and/or physical fatigue	Increased breaks, shorter work days, or a gradual return to work schedule
Becoming easily stressed and overwhelmed	Increased breaks, job restructuring for essential job functions only
Headaches	Quiet work areas, more frequent breaks
Problems with vision	Assistive technology such as different glasses or computer programs
Conflicts with coworkers and colleagues ¹⁹	Sensitivity training for supervisors and staff, approved breaks for stress management, allotted time for calls to counselors, individual or group psychotherapy for skill training in areas of communication and emotional regulation
Weakness and/or decreased coordination on 1 side of the body	Hands-free telephone systems, ergonomic workstations, modified keyboards, voice recognition software
Poor schedule flexibility	Consistent work hours that allow you to keep a consistent sleep schedule and morning and evening routine
Altered ability to drive	Ability to work from home or adjust work hours to allow for use of public transportation

productive through volunteer work, social activities, leisure and hobbies, or regular physical activities can provide many similar physical and mental health benefits.^{10,11}

When should I start thinking about return to work?

If you were employed at the time of your stroke and think you may want to return to work, it is important to start planning early. Although you may feel the need to return to work right away, most people need a period of rest and rehabilitation first.

Most people who have had a mild stroke and decide to return to work return within 3-6 months

to their same employer.¹² Waiting longer before returning to work can actually make the transition back to work more difficult.¹²⁻¹⁴

What should I do to return to my previous job?

The first step when returning to work is contacting your employer. You will need to contact either your direct supervisor or the human resources department. You should find out if you are eligible for short-term disability, long-term disability, or unpaid medical leave with job protection and benefits under the Family and Medical Leave Act.¹⁵ You must apply to receive these benefits. If you

Table 2 Additional resources

Organization	Description	Contact
National Stroke Association	Provides information and resources for those interested in returning to work, whether paid or unpaid, including a Return to Work Employment Readiness Assessment	www.stroke.org
Job Accommodation Network (JAN)	Provides free advice and consultation to individuals, employers, and health care providers on workplace accommodations, the Americans with Disabilities Act, and other work-related policies	https://askjan.org
Social Security Administration	Provides an annual <i>Red Book</i> for understanding employment supports and incentive programs	https://www.ssa.gov/redbook/
O*NET	Provides information on job requirements for hundreds of jobs	https://www.onetonline.org/
Vocational rehabilitation services	Run by the states. Contact information for state VR services can be found on the Job Accommodation Network website	https://askjan.org/cgi-win/TypeQuery.exe?902
Office of Personnel Management	Actively recruits individuals with disabilities for positions across the US federal government	https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/disability-employment/
Getting Hired	Recruiting company that works to connect employers with individuals with disabilities	http://www.gettinghired.com/
Volunteer Match	Database of volunteer opportunities	www.VolunteerMatch.org

have a union, you should consider contacting your union representative.

The human resources representative can help you understand and apply for the benefits that match your circumstances. Early communication with your employer will also help you to determine your job security and understand how supportive your employer will be of your decision to return to work and in providing accommodations if needed when you return.^{16,17}

Health care and community providers, like vocational counselors, psychologists, and occupational therapists, can also help work with your employer to create a successful return to work plan for you.¹⁷

What are reasonable accommodations?

Some people need *reasonable accommodations*, supportive services, and a gradual return to work plan. The Americans with Disabilities Act¹⁸ protects employees by preventing discrimination on the basis of disability and requires employers (with 15 or more employees) to provide reasonable accommodations. Requests for accommodations must be made in writing. [Table 1](#) shows some common problems experienced by people with

mild stroke and some potential accommodations. [Table 2](#) shows some additional resources that may be useful after a mild stroke.

What services are available to help you with your return to work decision and plan?

Several health care and community providers can help you determine how your mild stroke may affect your ability to return to work. Working with health care and community providers can support your ability to return to work. Given the complexity and diversity of work environments, there is never a guarantee about return to work and no one can actually predict how successful you will be if you decide to return to work. Lots of different factors contribute to success with return to work like abilities, emotions, motivation, and support from other people you work with like supervisors or colleagues. Here is a list of providers that might be helpful when returning to work.

- Neuropsychologists and rehabilitation psychologists can screen for and evaluate potential problems with emotional and thinking

skills through in-clinic assessments. They can also provide rehabilitation services and psychotherapy to help you develop strategies and improve your thinking skills like concentration, memory, and mental stamina in preparation for return to work.

- Mental health care providers can provide needed psychological support.
- Physical therapists can help create balance and endurance programs and/or provide recommendations for fitness routines which are helpful for getting through the work day. They can also provide recommendations for physical problems that might affect how you perform your job.
- Social workers or case managers can provide information on Social Security Disability Income and Supplemental Security Income if you are not able to return to work right away.
- Occupational therapists can analyze work-related tasks, requirements of your job, and your work environment. Occupational therapists can collaborate with employers, provide recommendations for work accommodations, and provide training in skills, strategies, and assistive technology to help you adapt to any difficulties (such as those discussed above) that might affect how you perform at your job.
- Speech-language pathologists can help with rehabilitation of work-related skills like thinking, talking, writing, and understanding information. They can provide recommendations in these areas that might impact how you perform your job.
- Vocational counselors can provide vocational evaluations and provide opportunities to perform tasks similar to real-world job roles, which can support decisions to return to work. They can also work with employers to help establish return to work plans and can help monitor your progress once you return.

What if returning to previous employer is not an option?

For those not able to return to their previous employment or who are seeking first-time employment, state vocational rehabilitation (VR) services can be an important resource. State

VR services can assist individuals with aptitude testing, skills training, and job searches.

What if returning to paid employment is not an option?

If you are not able to return to paid employment, volunteer work may be an option that provides some of the same benefits as paid employment. Vocational services can create work trials and help you identify potential volunteer opportunities. Some people may even prefer to volunteer instead of returning to paid employment. Volunteer work may also be the first step of a gradual return to work plan to help improve skills and endurance in preparation for return to paid employment if this is important to you.

The importance of advocacy

Because problems related to mild stroke are not always obvious, many adults with mild stroke are discharged from the hospital without receiving education about the effect of mild stroke and about resources and services that can support return to work.^{3,20} Many people with mild stroke do not receive referrals for continued rehabilitation services.¹ Adults with mild stroke who do return to work, whether services are received or not, may still experience challenges.¹⁹ Self-advocacy, which is the ability to speak and act on behalf of one's own needs, or advocacy by family members, may be needed to ensure that you receive needed services that can support safe and successful return to work.

Authorship

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