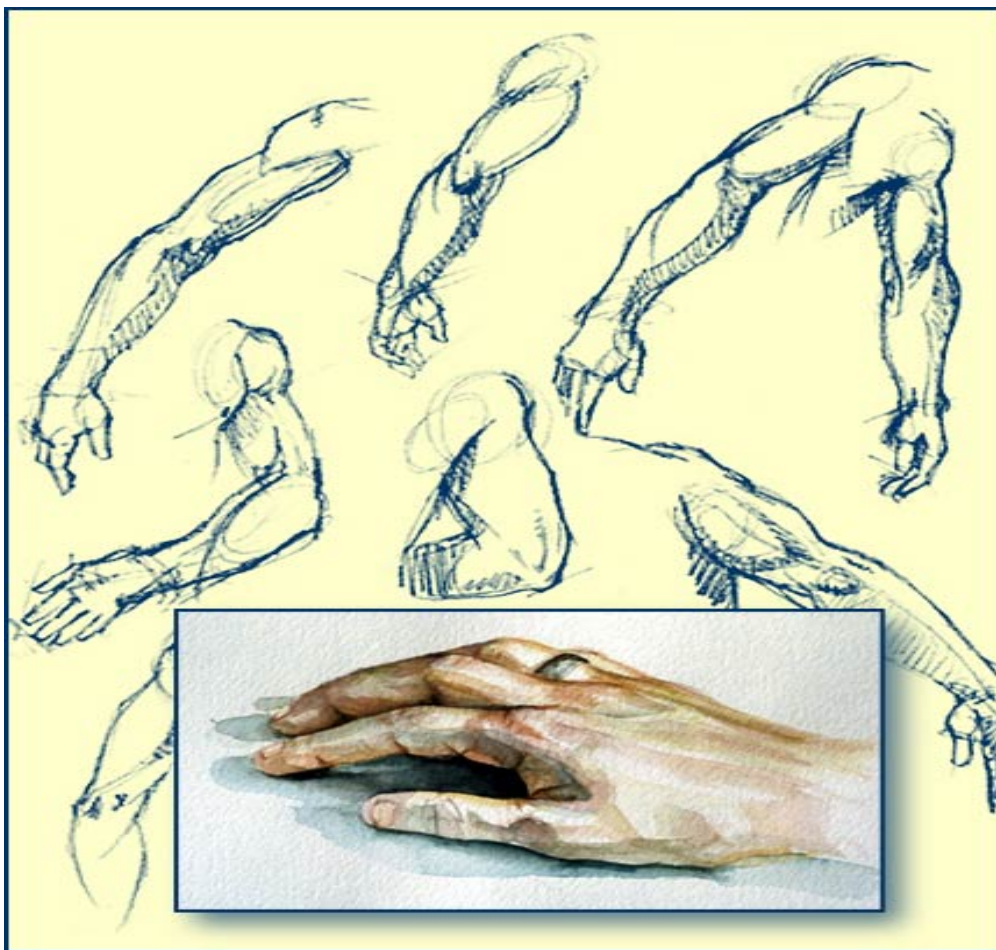


Physiotherapy Department

How to look after your weak arm



Stroke and Neuro-Rehabilitation

Introduction

After a stroke or damage to the brain your body can be affected in many different ways. This can make part of your body weak and / or numb so that you have difficulty moving as you used to. If you have a weak arm that has a very little movement and / or feeling then this booklet may help you keep your arm in optimal condition for recovery. You may find it useful if a friend or relative helps you with looking after your arm. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact a physiotherapist, occupational therapist, or rehabilitation assistant.

Because the arm is not moving, it might get **swollen, stiff** or **painful**, and these changes make recovery much harder.

Support and positioning

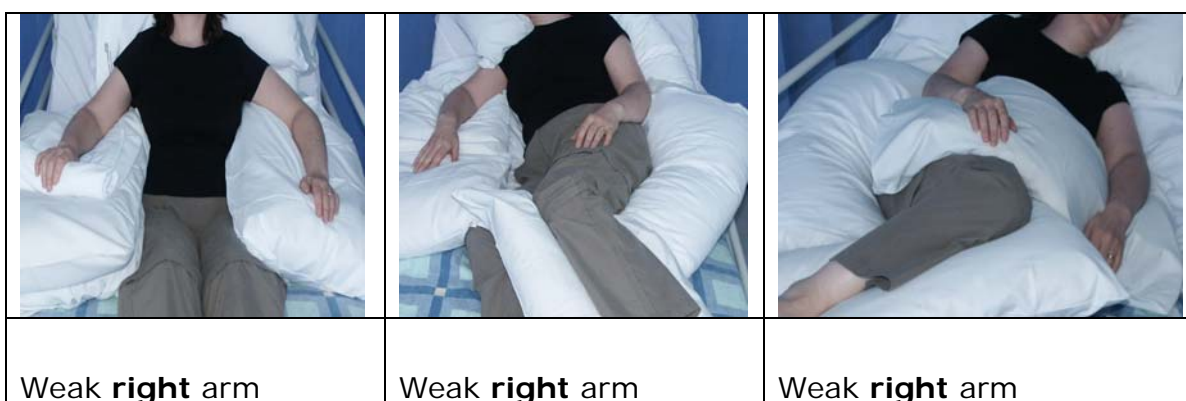
When the muscles of the arm weaken, the joints in the arm and hand are much more at risk of getting injured.

It is important that you position your arm so that it is supported. The weight of the arm on a weak shoulder can stretch the joint so much that the joint space widens; this is called a '**subluxed shoulder**'.

A **good position** is:

- natural and 'normal' looking
- not kept in any position for hours on end
- one that supports the shoulder and hand

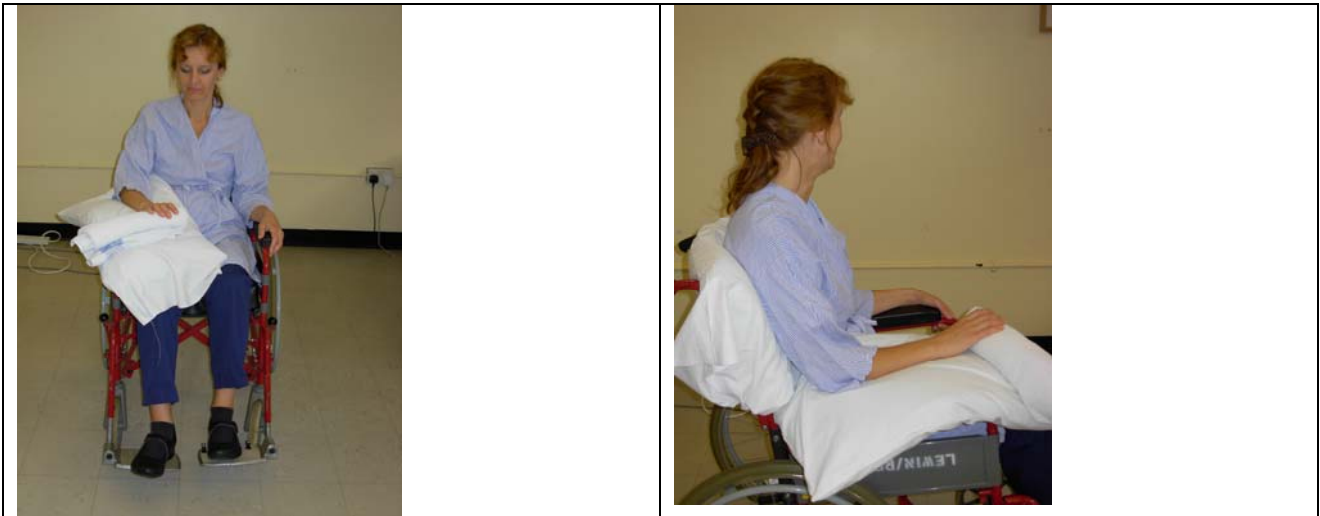
Comfortable positions in bed



Although it is okay to lie on your weak side, try to avoid this for long periods. Aim to keep your arm in a supported position when you can during the day and night, although it is okay if you roll when asleep moving your arm. If it then becomes painful you may need to move it to be supported again.

When you roll on to your side, try not to leave your arm dragging behind your body, try to bring it over your body first.

A good position in a chair (weak right arm)



Handling your arm

Careful handling of your arm is important as it can prevent damage. It is your arm, and you must take responsibility for looking after it and being gentle with it.

You should always:

- Check it is **fully supported** when moving between chairs; this should be done by yourself if possible, or the person assisting you.
- You can keep your arm inside a sling (also called a 'collar and cuff') whilst being moved. However, your arm should **never** be left in the sling for long periods as this encourages it to get stiff and painful in one position and to be neglected.
- Be aware of how others are handling your arm. This involves **no pulling, no lifting** under your arms, getting them to **move it slowly and gently**.

Swelling

Why does swelling occur in your affected arm?

- When you cannot move your arm, the muscles stop contracting and relaxing. This reduces the blood flow in your hand and arm, which can lead to a build up of fluid.
- Normally your hands touch lots of different surfaces and have to squeeze against objects which help to maintain the circulation.

What can you do to help prevent swelling?

- Keep your hand slightly **higher than your elbow**. Make sure it is **positioned on a pillow** and **not** down by the side of your chair.
- Massage from your fingers back up towards your shoulder with gentle but firm strokes. Remember to cover your palm as well as the back of the hand. Moisturiser or oil can be very useful.
- Keep moving it regularly throughout the day.

Skin care

You may find a build up of dry skin. To prevent it from building up you should:

- Soak the affected hand in warm water (check the water temperature with your other hand first). Wash between your fingers. Dry your hand thoroughly.
- Put some moisturiser on your hand and massage into your affected hand.

This is a useful way of keeping your arm healthy and can be something a **relative or friend** can do with you.

Loss of feeling

Sensation or feeling is lost due to damage of the area of the brain that has been affected. This means that you may not be as aware of your arm. Although you cannot feel your arm, this does not mean it cannot be injured.

- **Do** be careful when **you or others** handle your arm.
- **Do** always ensure you can **see your arm** and that it is supported.
- **Do not** let your arm drop down by your side and get trapped beside you or in the wheelchair.
- **Do not** put your affected arm in water that is **too hot**. Check temperatures with your other hand first.
- **Do not** allow your arm to catch on sharp objects.

You can help stimulate your arm by:

- Moving your arm.
- Placing your hand in warm and cooler water.
- Massage.
- Using different fabrics and textures on your hand, for example cloth, paper, plastic, rubber etc and try to guess what they are without looking at them.

Pain

Many people suffer with painful arms after a stroke or brain injury; it can happen in different ways and vary greatly between people.

Pain is usually caused by a combination of things, such as:

- Stiffness in muscles and joints in the arm or hand (so that movement or stretching causes pain).
- Rough handling.
- Poor positioning.

- Altered sensation (which might make you less aware of your arm and more likely to injure it).
- Swelling.
- A subluxed shoulder (when the weight of your arm begins to separate the shoulder joint).

Tell people if you have pain so that you can be assessed and the doctor can advise if medication may help.

Keep moving your arm and follow the advice in this booklet to prevent the pain from worsening, or you become too anxious to move the arm.

Exercises

You may have difficulty moving your arm, but leaving it can make the muscles and joints of your arm stiffen.

Below are some **gentle exercises**. You should try to repeat each exercise **10 times a day**.

Try and add them into your **daily** routine, or get into the habit of doing them throughout the day. These should **always** be comfortable and **never painful**. Give your arm as much support as possible.

1 – Going out to the side

Hold your elbow and forearm and **gently lift the elbow up** so your arm comes away from the body. Keep going until the shoulder is at 90 degrees.



2 – Forwards

Support your elbow and forearm; take your arm **forwards** until your shoulder is at 90 degrees.

3 – Rotating outwards

Bend your elbow and keep it close to your body throughout the exercise. Move your wrist away from your body so it is **rotating outwards**. This can be tight so be careful.



4 – Bend and straighten elbow

Bend and straighten your arm as far as it will comfortably go. Ensure your arm is well supported at the elbow.



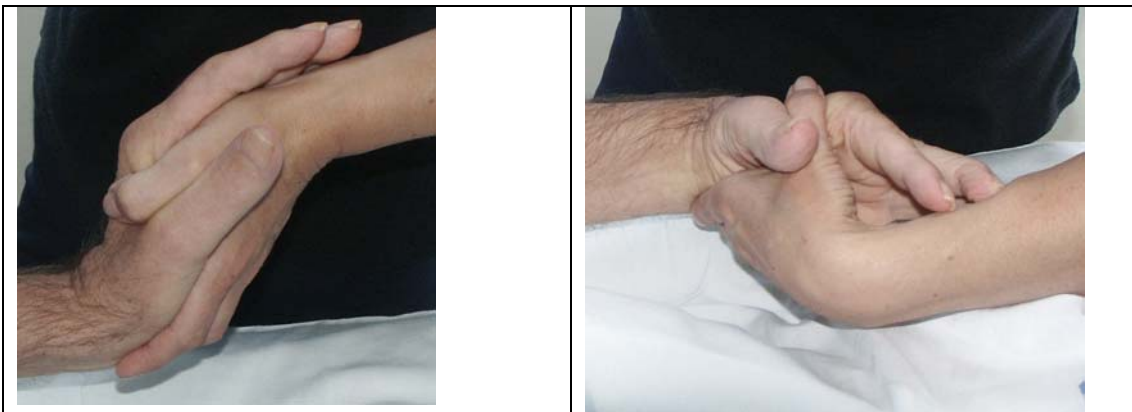
5 – Turning forearm

Bend your arm, **turn your forearm palm up and then palm down**. Try to hold a short stretch each side.



6 – Wrist movement

Bend the wrist up and down. The most important way to stretch is as in the picture below on left.



7 – Move fingers

Bend and straighten your fingers regularly. Try to move them at the little joints in each finger.



8 – Move thumb

Stretch your thumb away from your palm and your other fingers then bend it towards them.



The future...

Recovery of your arm is variable and difficult to predict:

- You may get good return of movement and use of your arm.
- You may get limited movement return, but still be able to use your arm to help with some tasks.
- You may get good movement return, but not be able to use your arm for tasks.
- You may not get good return of movement or use of your arm.

Some ways that you can help your arm to recover are:

- To look after your arm as in this booklet.
- Try to use your arm as much as possible, even if it does not seem to be doing anything.
- Do not forget about your arm, **use it!**

Remember... it takes time so keep trying.



We are currently working towards a smoke-free site. Smoking is only permitted in the designated smoking areas.

For advice and support in quitting, contact your GP or the free NHS Stop Smoking helpline on 0800 169 0 169

Help with this leaflet:





If you would like this information in another language, large print or audio format, please ask the department to contact

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