



American Stroke Association®
A division of the American Heart Association.

Together to End Stroke®

How Stroke-Related Cognitive Changes Can Lead to Falls —.....

A Guide for Family Caregivers

After a stroke, your loved one may be up to five times more likely to experience a fall. Changes in thinking, memory, and judgment are common, and these can make everyday decisions feel harder for them. You might notice your loved one doing things that seem unsafe or unlike their usual self.

These changes can be worrying, but you're not alone. Understanding why they happen — and knowing what signs to look for — can make it easier to keep your loved one safe and support their recovery with confidence.

HOW COGNITIVE CHANGES INCREASE FALL RISK •



Attention and Distraction

When survivors of stroke have trouble focusing, they may not plan their movements well. This can lead to unsafe choices, such as forgetting to use their walker or trying to stand on a chair to reach something. Talking while walking can also be distracting, making it harder to notice obstacles. They might not realize when they're off-balance or leaning too far, which can lead to a fall.



Impulsivity and Risk-Taking

When survivors of stroke are unaware of their limits, their actions may seem impulsive. They may stand up and try to move too quickly. They might not recognize when tasks are unsafe.



Memory and Communication

Survivors of stroke may forget to use mobility aids and can be unaware or forget that they have balance issues. They may forget they need help or repeat unsafe behaviors. Communication issues can prevent them from asking for help. It may be hard for them to understand safety instructions. People with communication challenges are twice as likely to fall.



Spatial Neglect

After a stroke, some survivors of stroke experience changes in spatial awareness. This means they may have difficulty sensing where their body is in relation to their surroundings. Judging distances can be hard, and they might not notice one side of their body or the space around them. This can make it challenging to see obstacles or understand how far away objects are. These changes increase the risk of falls because moving safely through the environment becomes harder.

WHAT TO WATCH FOR AND WHAT YOU CAN DO



Attention and Distraction

After a stroke your loved one may have trouble focusing and may appear more distracted.

What to Watch Out For

- ❗ Getting distracted while walking
- ❗ Having trouble walking and talking at the same time
- ❗ Not realizing when they're off-balance or leaning far on one side of the body

What You Can Do

- ✅ Create quiet, non-distracting environments for walking and moving around
- ✅ Encourage them to focus on one task at a time
- ✅ Encourage them to move their body to the center. They may report feeling like they are leaning to one side. With repetition, being centered will begin to feel more normal.



Impulsivity and Risk-Taking

After a stroke your loved one may be unaware of their limits. They may act quickly without thinking about the consequences.

What to Watch Out For

- ❗ Fast movements without being aware of surroundings or safety
- ❗ Overestimating abilities despite limitations

What You Can Do

- ✅ Encourage "pause and plan" before any movement or activity
- ✅ Keep things that encourage safe behaviors within easy reach (mobility aids, remote controls)



Memory and Communication

After a stroke your loved one may forget new information or safety steps they learned. They may have trouble communicating clearly or expressing their wants.

What to Watch Out For

- ❗ Poor planning (not gathering needed items before standing up)
- ❗ Not using or consistently forgetting mobility aids
- ❗ Forgetting how to do things safely
- ❗ Seem to know what to do when they're asked/told, but then not able to follow through with the task

What You Can Do

- ✅ Establish consistent daily routines that include safety steps
- ✅ Use visual reminders about using mobility aids
- ✅ Create written safety reminders and post them where they're easily seen
- ✅ Consider environmental modifications that don't rely on memory (automatic lighting, grab bars)
- ✅ Create picture-based communication aids for safety needs
- ✅ Learn to recognize non-verbal signs that indicate the need for help



Spatial Neglect

After a stroke your loved one may have trouble knowing where their body is in space. It can be hard for them to judge distances. They may be unaware of one side of their body or surroundings.

What to Watch Out For

- ❗ Not noticing obstacles in their path
- ❗ Not noticing obstacles or hazards on one side of their body
- ❗ Bumping into doorways or furniture
- ❗ Unsure how high the steps are (not stepping high enough, or stepping down too hard)

What You Can Do

- ✅ Remove or rearrange furniture to create wider, clearer pathways
- ✅ Improve lighting throughout the house
- ✅ Arrange the environment to encourage attention to the neglected side

This guide provides general information about cognitive changes after stroke. Every survivor of stroke is different. Always consult with your health care team for personalized advice.

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