

A complete guide to **STROKE** for employers

Te Ahi Tūmanako
The Flame of Hope

Stroke
Aotearoa NZ

If you have a colleague who is returning to work after a stroke, this guide can help you support them.

At Stroke Aotearoa New Zealand, we understand the challenges of returning to work after experiencing a stroke. This guide has been created to provide employers with the information and guidance they need to support colleagues affected by stroke to successfully return to the workplace.

This information will be useful for stroke survivors and their families as well.

We will show you what a stroke is, the changes it can cause, and how these can affect someone in the workplace. We will also show you how best to support someone when they are ready to return to work.

If you have any further questions, please visit stroke.org.nz, call our free Helpline 0800 STROKE (0800 78 76 53) or go to page 11 of this guide for additional resources and places to get help.

Stroke Aotearoa would like to gratefully acknowledge the work of Stroke Association UK in the creation of this guide and for their permission to use "Complete Guide to Stroke for Employers" as the basis of this document.



Please note: While we've made every effort to provide the best possible up-to-date and relevant information, this is not intended to be an exhaustive guide. It should not be relied upon as a substitute for professional, specialist advice including advice regarding your legal obligations as an employer or otherwise.

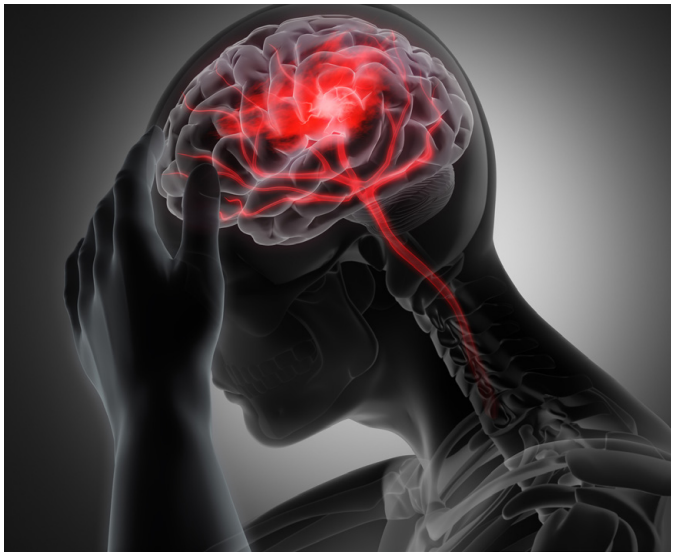
Stroke Aotearoa New Zealand gratefully acknowledges the assistance of a grant from the Ministry of Health Discretionary Fund to produce an earlier version of this information.

What is a stroke?

A stroke is a sudden loss of brain function.

Stroke is caused by either a blockage (usually a blood clot) that restricts the flow of blood to part of the brain, or when a blood vessel bursts and damages brain cells. Normal blood flow is essential to bring oxygen to brain cells so they can work properly. In both situations, without normal oxygen flow to the brain cells, the affected part of the brain is damaged. If blood flow is not restored quickly, this damage can't be repaired.

The effects of a stroke may vary, depending on the part of the brain affected and the extent of the damage. Some people make a full recovery and can return to their normal lives. Others may experience disabilities that range from mild to severe; while some of these disabilities may improve over time and be manageable, many can be long-lasting or permanent. The most common challenges due to stroke include limb or face weakness or numbness, problems with speaking, vision, walking, and fatigue.

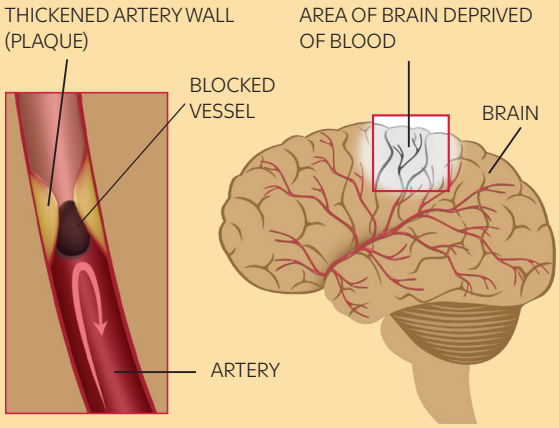


More than one in four strokes happen to people of working age. With the right support and guidance, many people successfully return to work after a stroke.

Blocked blood vessel in brain causing a stroke

Ischaemic stroke

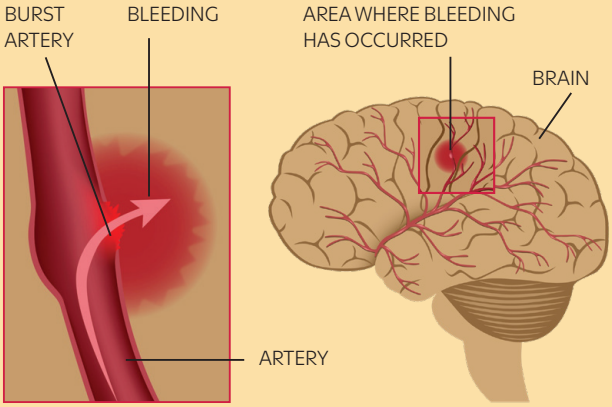
Blood supply in brain is blocked or insufficient.



Bleed into brain causing a stroke

Haemorrhagic stroke

Blood vessel expands and bursts, with bleeding into brain.



Your support is crucial

A stroke can dramatically change someone's life and your employee will need your support. They may be experiencing emotional, mental or physical changes. They may also be worrying about their financial situation, the wellbeing of their family, and find themselves navigating an unfamiliar benefits system.

Often, the stroke survivor's return to work is part of their recovery, not the end of it. Support from the employer is crucial for a successful return to work. When your employee says they might be ready to return, you should work with them to identify their needs and the adjustments you can make as their employer to help them succeed.

One way you can support your employee is in your use of language. A stroke can be a major event: it will encourage and empower your employee if you refer to them as a stroke "survivor" rather than a "victim".

TEN WAYS TO SUPPORT YOUR EMPLOYEE:



1) Timing is important

Often people just want to get back to 'normal' after a stroke, so it can be tempting to rush back to work. You may want your employee back in their role as soon as possible, but if people return to work before they or their employers are ready, it can lead to problems further down the line. Too much of a delay can affect someone's confidence and make it more difficult when they do come back, so it's important to find a balance that is mutually beneficial.

The best thing to do is to stay in touch with your employee (or their family in some cases) and plan for their return together. This will help you understand what support they need and give you time to put it in place before they come back, which should make it much easier for both of you.



2) Ask the expert

Every stroke survivor is an expert in their own needs, so don't be afraid to ask your employee about the best way for you to support them. Start by being open and supportive. Let them know that their needs are important. And keep talking. It can take time to become aware of all the different changes that happen after a stroke. Your employee may not have all the answers straight away and things are likely to change as time goes on.



3) Listen

It is really important to set up clear, open channels of communication with your employee as soon as possible, so you can understand how their stroke has affected them. Listen without judgement to what they tell you. Ask questions to make sure you understand and have all the information you need.



4) Don't make assumptions

No two strokes are the same, just like no two people are the same. Some people will have visible disabilities (such as problems walking) but for others their disabilities may not be visible (such as difficulties with concentration or fatigue).

These 'hidden' disabilities can make it difficult to know that someone needs support. That is why it is important to ask and listen.



5) Respect their privacy

Be sensitive to your employee's right to privacy. They may not wish to disclose their disabilities or the fact they have had a stroke. Ask them if they would like to let other colleagues know. Then decide together the best way to do this.

6) Check guidelines and agreements

Find out if your organisation has policies in place for long-term illness or absence. Familiarise yourself with these and speak to the relevant teams in your organisation such as Human Resources and Occupational Health for additional guidance. Check to see what financial support your employee is entitled to receive, such as sickness pay. Make sure you give information as promptly as you can, so your employee has enough time to respond, and present it in a way that is clear and easy to understand.

7) Ask about support

Your employee may be able to get financial or practical support via the Ministry of Social Development (MSD) (see page 8). Your employee may also be receiving support from an Occupational Therapist (OT) and/or a Stroke Aotearoa Return to Work Advisor who can help them decide when they are ready to return to work. Your employee may be able to put you in touch with their OT so they can help you understand how the stroke has affected them and answer any questions you may have.

Stroke Aotearoa Return to Work Advisors can also provide information, advice and assistance specifically for employers.

Arrange ways to keep in touch while your employee is away from work. Once they are ready, meet to create a plan for returning to work.



8) Create a Return to Work Plan

Arrange ways to keep in touch while your employee is away from work. Once they are ready, meet to create a plan for returning to work. This can include the number of days they will work each week and how many hours each day. Most people find that a graduated return, which allows them to gradually build up to their previous working hours, supports long term recovery and ensures a successful and sustainable return to work by helping to manage fatigue, reduce cognitive overload, and build up tolerance gradually. This approach can significantly enhance outcomes for the employee and the employer.

You should also review the tasks that they do and any changes that need to be made to them. It is a good opportunity to update your employee on any team or organisational changes that may have happened whilst they've been away from work.

Stroke Aotearoa Return to Work Advisors can assist you with this process, or if a community rehabilitation team is involved, they may also be able to assist.

9) Trial and review

Your employee's needs are likely to change as their recovery continues. Set regular times to review the arrangements you have agreed to. Be honest about what is or is not working and encourage your employee to do the same. Try to be as flexible and creative as you can.

10) Be flexible

It is likely that your employee will continue to have appointments with health professionals once they return to work. You should try to allow time off for these appointments as they will be an essential part of their recovery.

What is...

Reasonable accommodation?

The Human Rights Act 1993 creates an obligation for an employer to take reasonable measures to meet an employee's needs in the workplace in relation to a disability, regardless of whether this is permanent or temporary.

Reasonable accommodation means necessary and appropriate modification and adjustments where needed to meet the employee's needs in relation to a disability.

Reasonable accommodation can mean modifications or adjustments to the workplace which will allow people with a disability to participate more equally in a workplace. It may involve physical adjustments such as ensuring access to a building, or modifying the way a job is done, e.g. allowing a graduated return to work or allocating aspects of the job to another employee.

It's important not to make assumptions about what someone needs in the way of reasonable accommodation. Always ask the person, rather than trying to guess what would be appropriate. Adjustments are as individual as the people who need them and the circumstances in which they are used.

Most reasonable accommodations don't cost anything at all – just a change in approach. For others that do involve a cost, funding may be available from Work and Income or MSD. This funding may be for equipment, for a job coach, transport etc. A Stroke Aotearoa Return to Work Advisor can advise you about what may be available for your situation.

What is considered reasonable?

The Human Rights Act 1993 does not require changes that would unreasonably disrupt an employer's activities. Only adjustments that are reasonable have to be made. Factors taken into account when considering what is reasonable are:

- the effectiveness of the adjustment in assisting the employee with disability to perform their job
- whether it is practical to make the adjustment
- the financial or other costs of the adjustment
- the extent of the organisation's, and other, resources
- how much disruption, if any, will be caused to your business or other people
- whether you can receive help with making the adjustment and towards its cost from Job & Training Support Funds
- the nature of your business and the size of your organisation

A graduated return?

A graduated return (also known as a phased return) means that your employee would return to work on a part-time basis and gradually build up their hours. Your employee could initially return for four hours a day, two days a week, for example, and increase their hours from there. It may take time to return to the amount of hours they were working before, so try to be as flexible as you can. Many people find a graduated return makes the biggest difference to their recovery, supports them to manage conditions like fatigue, and enables a successful transition to working again. It could also have benefits for you, as it gives you the chance to see what's working and assess any further changes that may be needed.

Another approach to graduated return to work is for the employee to have a temporary reduction, or change, in tasks and duties until they feel capable and confident of resuming their role in full.

A Graduated Return to Work Programme is an example of a Reasonable Accommodation.

For more information, Human Rights Commission website: www.tikatangata.org.nz/resources-and-support/guidelines/reasonable-accommodation-guidelines

THE EFFECTS OF STROKE

How well someone recovers from a stroke depends on many factors, including how quickly their stroke was treated and the support and therapy they received afterwards.

People can make excellent recoveries and even if they are left with the effects of their stroke, these can continue to improve over time.

Over the next few pages, you will find a brief guide to some of the side effects or challenges your employee may be coping with and how you can help. It's important to remember that everyone's experience of stroke is different. The best way to understand how your employee has been affected is to ask them.

There are effects of stroke you can't see!

Although your employee may look physically fine, they could still be coping with other difficulties or side effects relating, for example, to communication, concentration, or fatigue. Very often people are not aware of the extent of these side-effects until they are back at work. The best thing to do is to have open, regular communication.

Some stroke survivors struggle to talk about their difficulties or may not wish to, so you'll need to be as supportive and patient as you can. Ask questions and encourage your employee to do the same.

Communication

Some stroke survivors experience speech and language problems. This can include difficulties with speaking and understanding what people are saying. It can also affect reading and writing. This is called aphasia.

- If your employee is having difficulty speaking, you need to give them time. Try not to interrupt – with enough time, they will be able to answer for themselves.
- Remember your employee's intelligence has not been affected, just their ability to use and understand language.
- Aphasia NZ (www.aphasia.org.nz) may also be able to provide assistance.



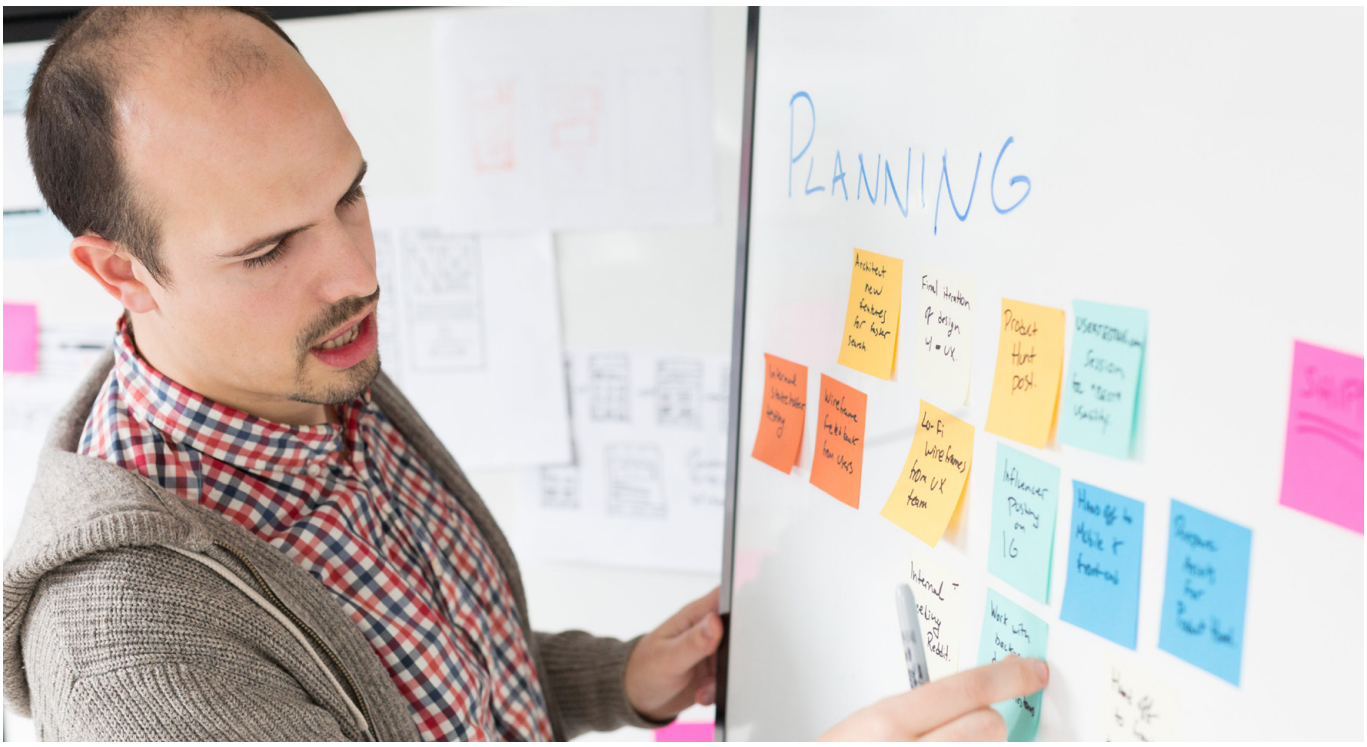
Cognition

A stroke can affect the way your brain understands, organises and stores information. This can make it difficult to concentrate, remember things or solve problems. Side-effects relating to concentration and short-term memory are common after a stroke.

How can you help?

- Written instructions or a reference guide could be useful for someone who has difficulties with their short-term memory. Instructions for using a piece of equipment, for example, could be helpful, so your employee does not feel they have to keep asking the same question.
- Keep verbal or written instructions clear and concise and try not to overload them with too much information at once.
- Reducing distractions and allowing for regular breaks can often help to improve concentration.
- Using email instead of verbal communication to make requests or give information creates a record the employee can refer to.

For more information, Aphasia NZ website: www.aphasia.org.nz



Emotional side-effects

A stroke is sudden and shocking and affects every part of your life. It is a lot to deal with, and everyone deals with it differently. Anxiety and frustration can sometimes make people feel they are unable to cope. Depression can also follow a stroke.

How can you help?

- Frequent reviews will help both you and your employee. This will allow you to catch issues early on and implement any changes that are needed.
- Check to see if your organisation can offer any counselling or emotional support. Many organisations have access to Employee Assistance Programmes (EAP) that often provide such services.
- Encourage your employee to talk to their GP about emotional support and counselling or find out about services they can refer themselves to. Stroke Aotearoa Free Helpline 0800 STROKE (0800 78 76 53) is a good place to start.

Physical effects

A stroke can have any number of physical effects. It can cause weakness or loss of movement in an arm, leg, or down one whole side of the body. As well as affecting someone's mobility, this can also cause a great deal of pain. A stroke can also affect vision, balance and coordination.

How can you help?

- You may need to make some adaptations to your employee's workspace – they may need a more supportive chair, for example.
- Make sure the things they need are within easy reach and there is plenty of room to move around, to minimise the risk of falling.
- If they are having problems with their vision, they may need written information provided in a different way.

MSD can provide funding for adaptive equipment or modifications. If your employee is receiving support from their community rehabilitation team, they may have an occupational therapist who can visit your workplace and make recommendations.

Blind and Low Vision NZ – formerly The Blind Foundation can provide assistance for visually impaired workers.

For more information, Blind and Low Vision NZ website: www.blindlowvision.org.nz/



Tiredness & fatigue

Everyone feels tired sometimes. This is a normal part of life and it happens for all sorts of reasons, such as not sleeping well or having a busy day. Usually, people feel much better after resting or sleeping. Fatigue after stroke is different: your employee may feel constantly weary, tired and lacking energy or strength. These feelings and symptoms can stay present even after a rest or sleep.

Fatigue may result from the brain injury itself, or other effects from the stroke. Because activities that were once performed with little or no effort may now require great amounts of energy, a person recovering from stroke may experience an overwhelming sense of tiredness. This fatigue may directly impact work performance by making physical functioning, attention, concentration, memory and communication more difficult.

When a person recovering from stroke returns to work, it is difficult to know how much they should do and for how long.

Your employee may try to return to work too quickly or take on too much responsibility too soon. To give the greatest chance for success, many employees return to their former positions on reduced duties. This allows them to better manage fatigue and improve their chances for a successful return to work.

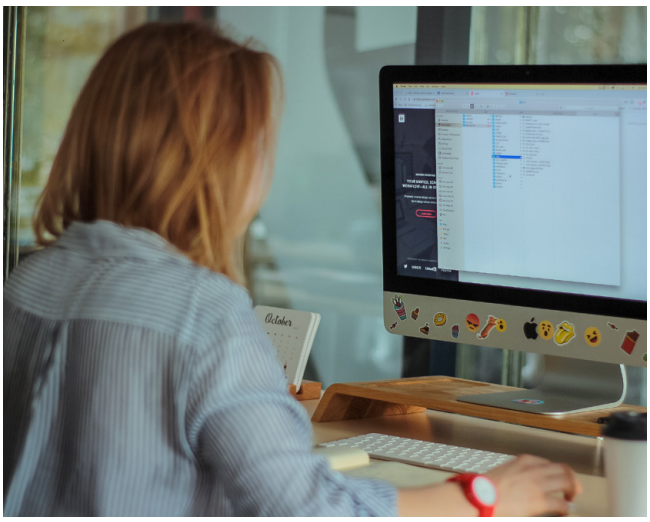
Often this reduced workload is accompanied with guidelines for gradually increasing work hours and responsibilities.

In time, your employee's stamina and energy levels are likely to improve, and work hours and responsibilities may be increased. However, be aware that during this transitional time, it is possible for both employer and employee to become frustrated with the gradual pace and changes in responsibility. It is important to remember that this is just one step in the recovery process for someone recovering from the effects of a stroke.

If you can create a supportive work environment with open communication between your employee and their line manager, this will go a long way to promote healthy gains in performance and achieve a successful return to employment.

How can you help?

- Regular breaks may help your employee to manage their tiredness. Flexibility in start and finish times can also be helpful.
- Schedule energy-intensive tasks, or tasks requiring high concentration levels for times when your employee's fatigue is at a minimum.
- Read the Stroke Aotearoa information sheet "Fatigue After Stroke" for more tips and advice.



Driving after a stroke

Getting back behind the wheel is usually a priority for a driver who has had a stroke. However, your employee will not be permitted to drive for at least four weeks after a stroke and at least two weeks after a single Transient Ischemic Attack (TIA). This initial stand down period is due to the risk of:

- having another stroke or TIA
- having a seizure
- experiencing other neurological problems

It is important to remember that as long as your employee's health professional agrees it is safe, they may be able to drive again after the stand-down period. The table below outlines the legal guidelines for driving after a stroke.



Legal Guidelines about driving after stroke in New Zealand

NZ TRANSPORT AUTHORITY SUMMARY REGARDING LEGAL GUIDELINES FOR RETURNING TO DRIVING

MEDICAL CONDITION	TYPE OF LICENCE: CARS AND MOTORCYCLES (class 1 or class 6 licence and/or a D, F, R, T or W endorsement)	TYPE OF LICENCE: HEAVY VEHICLES (class 2, 3, 4 or 5 licence and/or a P, V, I or O endorsement)
STROKE	Generally unfit to drive. May be fit to drive after four weeks, and only once clinical recovery is completed and no significant residual disability present.	Generally unfit to drive. May be fit to drive after three months following an ischaemic stroke, subject to certain criteria. May be fit to drive after 12 months following a haemorrhagic stroke, subject to certain criteria.
TIA (Transient Ischaemic Attack)	For a single event, generally fit to drive after two weeks.	For a single event, generally fit to drive after four weeks.
EPILEPSY AFTER STROKE	Shouldn't drive for 12 months. Fit to drive after six months, with a supporting neurologist's opinion.	Generally unfit to drive. Fitness to drive may be reconsidered if the patient is seizure-free for a minimum of five years without medication, and a neurologist's opinion supports the application. Consideration may also be given to patients who are stable for 10 years on medication.

NZ Transport Authority Waka Kotahi can provide further information about returning to drive. You can call them free on **0800 822 422.**

For more information call free on: 0800 822 422.

EMPLOYMENT

What if my employee cannot return to their previous job?

NOTE: The fact that an employee has experienced a stroke is not sufficient, in and of itself, to justify dismissal from their position. The onus is on you as the employer to demonstrate your employee is no longer capable of performing their job in a safe or effective manner, and that a fair process has been undertaken. Failure to do so may result in a personal grievance or other legal action being taken against you.

Unfortunately, there are some jobs where having had a stroke may prevent the employee from returning to their previous role for legal or safety reasons.

For example:

- A professional truck driver may not be able to drive a heavy vehicle for a period of time.
- A nurse who has cognitive impairments may put patients they are caring for at risk of harm.
- A builder who has lost the function of one arm may not be physically capable of doing the job.

In such cases, the employer needs to consider if there is a suitable vacancy to which the employee could be redeployed and developed.

Redeployment should be considered when:

- no effective accommodations have been identified that will enable the employee to perform the essential functions of their current job

or

- accommodating the employee to do their current job would impose a disproportionate burden on the employer, or place undue risk on the health and safety of the employee or others.

Where possible, redeployment should be to a suitable position equivalent to the person's current role or level. If there is no such position available or able to be created, then you and your employee should discuss whether a position at a lower level would be acceptable.

For example:

- The truck driver had a delay in being able to drive heavy vehicles due to New Zealand Transport Agency regulations. He was, however, permitted to drive a car and so was offered the role of driving the pilot car ahead of trucks with large loads.
- The builder took over the role of providing quotations for prospective customers and followed up by establishing a contract with a local insurance company office to do assessment of costs for house repairs.

If the employee cannot return to their previous job, and if no suitable and acceptable alternative post is available, you as the employer may have to terminate the employee's contract. Before doing so, you should ensure:

- you follow established employment procedures, and those set out in your policies or employment agreements
- that you have the most accurate and up to date medical information as possible
- you advise the employee that they are potentially facing dismissal, provide the employee with all of the information that you, as the employer, are relying on, and give the employee an opportunity to comment on that information in a meeting or meetings at which the employee is able to be represented. It is common for a dismissal for incapacity process to take a number of weeks or months, and for there to be a number of meetings or exchanges of information
- that you have explored all possible other options

For more information: https://www.employment.govt.nz/ending-employment/health-issues

SUPPORT

Where can I get help and support?

Anyone can call our free helpline, no referral is necessary. Community Stroke Navigators are available to take your call 9am-5pm weekdays. You can leave a message or email **help@stroke.org.nz** to arrange a call back if you wish. Or you can also call our free helpline 0800 STROKE (0800 78 76 53)

Return to work advice and support:

Our specialist Return to Work Advisors are available to assist stroke survivors and their employers with work-related advice and support. Your employee can ask their medical team about eligibility and a referral or contact Stroke Aotearoa directly.



Health15: Protecting the health and wellbeing of all your employees

Health15 is a health and wellbeing initiative to support busy workers by delivering a range of health services directly to your workplace. While there is a cost involved, you cannot put a price on a life. The service is provided in collaboration with seven health charities to meet the needs of your employees and provides critical health checks and education to help reduce the risk of long-term conditions like diabetes, heart disease, arthritis, stroke, and cancer. For more information, visit: **www.health15.nz** or email: **enquiry@health15.nz**



Further Resources & Helpful Links

Stroke Aotearoa Resource Hub: www.stroke.org.nz/resource-hub/

Aphasia NZ: www.aphasia.org.nz

Blind Low Vision: www.blindlowvision.org.nz

About Stroke Aotearoa New Zealand

Stroke Aotearoa New Zealand is the national charity dedicated to stroke prevention and improving outcomes for stroke survivors and their whānau. The generosity of individuals allows us to provide every aspect of our life-changing services.

If you want to find out more about donating or fundraising to help protect the lives of people living in your community, please call **0800 45 99 54** or email **fundraising@stroke.org.nz.**



Preventing
Stroke
Improving
Lives

Stroke
Aotearoa NZ

Helpline 0800 STROKE (0800 78 76 53) | PO Box 12482, Wellington 6144
Level 1, Thorndon Rise, 95-99 Molesworth St, Wellington 6011
Freephone 0800 45 99 54 | **E** strokenz@stroke.org.nz | **W** stroke.org.nz
Charities Services number CC49490