

Will I be able to drive after my stroke?

People recover at different rates after a stroke. Some people will be back driving after a month, others may take longer. Studies suggest that about half of those who experience a stroke return to driving. When, and if, you return to driving depends on many factors. A health professional should speak to you about driving. If no one mentions driving, it is important that you or a family member ask a health professional, possibly your doctor or an occupational therapist, for information. It is important for your safety and the safety of others that your readiness for driving be assessed.

Are there rules or regulations about driving after stroke?

While rules vary in different provinces most have specific time delays before an individual is permitted to resume driving after a stroke. For example, the Canadian Medical Association has specific Guidelines regarding driving that say someone who has had a stroke should not be allowed to drive for at least one month. There are also rules about driving if you experience specific problems related to your stroke. For example, people with an impairment called homonymous hemianopsia (blindness on one side of both eyes) that may occur after a stroke, are generally not permitted to drive.

When should I be assessed for driving?

Most of the recovery takes place within the first three months after the stroke, and continues at a slower pace for months, and possibly years following the stroke. While you might be very anxious to return to driving, it is important to be assessed at the right time, once your medical condition has stabilized. You may also need to learn some new skills or practice doing specific tasks differently after your stroke. For example, if your stroke paralyzed your right leg, you may need to learn to drive using your left leg. Also try not to take your assessment if you have just started taking a new medication. Some medications may affect your driving, especially when you first begin taking them.

What is the purpose of a driving assessment?

A detailed driving assessment should be performed by a health professional with expertise in driving assessment. The individual will be evaluating you to see if:

- Specific problems you are experiencing from your stroke make driving dangerous.
- You need to work on specific skills and learn new ways of driving before you take an on-road driving test or resume driving.

- You are able to drive safely but you need certain adaptations to your car and training on how to use them.
- You are able to drive safely but with certain restrictions, for example, no night driving.
- You are able to drive safely without modifications or restrictions.

Who performs a driving assessment?

A detailed driving assessment should be performed by a health professional with expertise in driving assessment. This individual is termed a driver rehabilitation specialist or driving evaluator. Most often this person is an occupational therapist with special training in driving evaluation. You should verify that the person you see has specialized training in driving evaluation.

What does a driving assessment consist of?

You may undergo a quick evaluation by a doctor or other health professional, typically an occupational therapist. Based on the result of the quick evaluation they will either consider you ready to return to driving, or indicate that you need to have a detailed driving evaluation. A detailed driving assessment usually consists of two parts—a pre-road evaluation and an on-road evaluation.

Pre-road evaluation: The pre-road evaluation usually takes place in the driving evaluator's office. She will typically ask you about your medical history and your driving history and habits. She may assess your arm and leg movements, strength and sensation. You will also need to have a visual assessment (there are specific rules about vision and driving) and you will usually need to bring a report from a visual specialist such as an ophthalmologist. The driving evaluator may decide to do a series of paper and pencil or computer tests to evaluate, amongst other things:

- How you are dealing with visual information.
- How quickly you respond to situations.
- How your memory is functioning.
- Your judgment and awareness about specific driving situations

On-road evaluation: The on-road assessment may be done on the same day as the pre-road evaluation, or on another day. Usually you will be asked to drive a car that is equipped with a passenger side brake for safety. There may be one or two people with you in the car. The person who sits in the front seat is usually a trained driving instructor who will give you directions on what route to take. This person is usually trained to work with people who have had a stroke. They understand about the stroke and how it can affect you and your driving. The driving evaluator will typically sit in the back seat and observe your driving while taking notes. The evaluation route may include driving on quiet and busy streets and may also include highway driving. You will be asked to perform specific driving maneuvers such as left turns. The evaluator will take notes on how you are doing - for example if you are keeping in your lane, driving at the correct

speed, stopping at red lights and stop signs. You may also be asked to find a specific destination using road signs.

I am really nervous about the driving evaluation

It is normal to be nervous during the evaluation. Try to do your best and focus on driving. Listen carefully to what the instructor is telling you to do and try to do each task as best you can.

Since my stroke I have difficulty speaking or understanding people when they speak—how will I be able to follow the driving instructor's directions?

If you have a problem understanding spoken directions because of your stroke, the instructor can show you cards with pictures on them to explain what he wants you to do. Make sure that you take the time to understand what you need to do. For example, he may show you a card that has a car turning left that he uses to let you know he wants you to turn left.

How long does a driving assessment take to complete and what do I need to do to prepare for the assessment?

A complete driving assessment usually takes about 2 hours (about 1 hour for the pre-road assessment and 1 hour on the road). This can vary depending on you and your driving evaluator.

It is important to ask about the details before you start the assessment including:

- How many appointments will it take to complete the assessment?
- What do I need to bring with me when I come for my appointment? For example, if you wear glasses make sure to bring them.
- What, if any, medical reports do I need to bring?

Will I have to pay for the assessment?

Depending on where you live and other circumstances related to the health care system in your area, you might have to pay for the assessment. The assessment may cost about \$300 to \$400. There is the cost of the driving evaluator's time and also of the driving instructor's time and the rental of the car you will use for the evaluation. Some driving evaluators will let you use your own car.

Is there any therapy to help me prepare to return to driving?

There are very few studies that have looked at the effects of retraining driving abilities after stroke. One study found that people who had a specific problem after the stroke—visual perception problems—benefited from a specialized computer training program when practiced for 6 weeks.

What are the possible outcomes of the driving evaluation?

The test might show that the specific problems caused by the stroke make driving dangerous and that it is unlikely that you will benefit from practice or retraining. The evaluator will then recommend that you do not continue driving.

The test might show that you have specific problems that you need to work on or new ways of driving that you must learn before you resume driving. The evaluator may suggest that you take some lessons with a specialized driving instructor. This instructor is usually someone who works with people who have had a stroke.

You may need certain adaptations (for example, a special mirror) to your car and training on how to use the adaptations. If all goes well with the training you will be able to resume driving.

The test may show that you drive safely in certain situations (light traffic). The evaluator may then recommend that you have certain restrictions placed on your driver's license. These "restricted licenses" are available in some, but not all, places. You will need to check for the specific rules where you live.

The test may show that you drive safely. The recommendation from the evaluator will be that you are licensed to drive with no restrictions.

What happens if I'm no longer allowed to drive?

Individuals with a stroke sometimes have to stop driving because of the paralysis or other problems related to the stroke. Many people find this very hard to accept. It is understandable if you feel angry or depressed about having to stop driving. It will be very important that you find help from family and friends so that you can continue your typical outings. Some communities have special transportation for those who have had a stroke. Find out about what is available in your community or ask a family member or friend to help you get information. It is important that you find ways of getting around your community. Research shows that those who stop driving after a stroke do less socializing and are more likely to become depressed. You have probably driven people around for many years—now it is your turn to let them return the favour.