



Coping with hemiplegia and hemiparesis

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Introduction

Hemiplegia (paralysis of one side of the body) or hemiparesis (weakness of one side of the body) can often occur following brain injuries, particularly strokes. These conditions can make everyday tasks extremely difficult.

This factsheet provides strategies for coping with the everyday problems hemiplegia and hemiparesis can cause. However, this should not replace specialist advice and support. A physiotherapist and/or occupational therapist will be able to advise you on ways to manage and improve the ability to use the parts of the body that are affected, and any specialist equipment that may be useful. Always consult an occupational therapist (OT) if there are major problems with bathing, toileting, dressing, or any other aspect of self-care or home-care. If you do not have access to an OT then you can ask your GP and/or local Social Services department about a referral.

Paralysis of arms or hands

If an arm or hand is paralysed, it is important to try to improve its function by treating it as normally as possible and not neglecting it. Place the limb in positions that were typically used before the brain injury, and place it where it can be seen. This is particularly important if the person lacks awareness of the affected limb.

One approach is to open the hand out flat and rest it, palm down, on the lap or table. Ask the physiotherapist if the hand and arm would benefit from lots of sensory stimulation, such as massaging the skin, rubbing briskly with a wet flannel, rubbing the hands together, kneading and rolling dough, etc.

Conventional wheelchairs can be very difficult to use one-handed and many people use powered wheelchairs instead. However, these are expensive, heavy and lack portability. One arm drive manual wheelchairs can overcome these problems. You could ask an OT or other healthcare professionals about the availability of these systems.



Sensory problems

If there is a sensory problem, such as inability to feel heat, cold, pain, etc, this area of the body will be particularly vulnerable and will need special attention. Care should be taken to ensure the affected area does not get too hot or cold, and to prevent the skin from coming into contact with things that could burn, scald, or cause other injury, such as sharp objects or rough surfaces.

Personal hygiene

Teeth: Experiment with different toothpaste dispensers. If using only one hand, lay the toothbrush on its back and squeeze the toothpaste over the bristles. Alternatively, hands free toothpaste dispensers are available.

Dentures: A suction denture brush is available, which works in a similar way to the suction nailbrush.

Nails: A suction nailbrush is available that can be stuck onto the sink, so that it does not need to be held. The unaffected side can use this easily, and then the affected hand can be held in position by the 'good' hand, and the nails rubbed back and forth, across the brush. A suction nail file is also available, which works in a similar way.

Toileting: Interleaved toilet tissue (as often used in pub and restaurant toilets) is easier to use, as tearing off tissue is difficult using one hand.

Shaving: Use an electric shaver, preferably a rechargeable one which does not need to be plugged in during use.

Dressing

Fastenings: Ideally, choose clothes without fastenings, such as T-shirts, Polo shirts, casual tops, and trousers or skirts with elasticated waistbands. Zips are extremely difficult to manage with one hand and are best avoided. When dressing, it is much easier to dress the affected side first, and undress it last.

Buttons: It is possible to do up a button one-handed, but it takes practice. A latch hook may be useful: insert the hook through the buttonhole, latch it onto the shank of the button, and pull the button back through the hole. For buttoned shirt cuffs, stitch elastic loops next to the buttonhole, and fasten the button through the elastic rather than the hole. This allows for the hand to pass through the cuff without needing to unfasten the buttons. You could also replace buttons with Velcro. Remove the buttons and stitch them back on over



the buttonholes. Stitch Velcro circles behind the buttonholes and onto the material where the buttons used to be.

Shoes: Choose shoes with Velcro fastenings, or slip-on styles. Buckles may be manageable, but check that both shoes can be fastened up. Elastic shoelaces are inexpensive, and can help to convert lace-up shoes into slip-ons by allowing extra 'give' across the top of the foot.

Bras: Choose a bra with as few hooks as possible. Try bras with front fastening, or bras with no fastenings, which slip on over the head. Alternatively, the rear fastening of the bra could be adapted by attaching a piece of Velcro.

Coping in the kitchen

Snap-on aprons: These have a bendy plastic waistband with a snap-fastener, avoiding the need for tying a bow behind the back.

Opening cans: Adapted can openers are available with handles that lock together with a single squeeze, and so do not need a constant strong grip to hold them together. Electric can openers, suitable for one-handed operation, are also available.

Slicing: Cutting guides are available for slicing bread and meat. These have upright pillars to hold the knife steady and make cutting safe and simple. The width of the slice can often be adjusted as necessary.

Spreading: Spreading boards are available, with two slightly raised edges at right angles to each other. The slice of bread is laid next to these edges to stop it from moving around during spreading.

Opening jars and bottles: There are a variety of grips to choose from. Some gadgets grip the lid while you turn the container; others grip the container while you turn the lid.

Cutting: Easy-grip scissors can be helpful if you need to use the opposite hand from the one that you would normally use. These open with a spring action, so very little strength is required.

Peeling: 'Rex' peelers have broader handles than traditional peelers and require less movement at the wrist. You could also try a battery operated peeler with a contoured handle for easier grip. There are even electric peelers available that do all the work and don't require holding. Alternatively, a grater/peeler unit is available, with spikes to hold food for conventional peeling and a separate scraper section. Vegetables are rubbed against the scraper to remove the peel. The scraper can also be used as a fine grater.



Boiling: Metal handle guards can be fastened onto the side of a cooker to hold pan handles steady while their contents are being stirred. When cooking vegetables in a saucepan, it can help to place a wire chip basket, or sieve, inside the saucepan before adding the vegetables. Once cooked, the vegetables can easily be drained by lifting up the basket. This prevents the problem of needing one hand to hold the pan, and another to hold the lid, or strainer, while pouring off the excess water. The water can then be left to cool before attempting to empty the saucepan.

Avoiding burns: Heatproof mats can be placed on the work surface, or adjacent to the oven, so that hot cookware can be placed onto them before being moved.

Chopping, grating and mixing: Food processors, blenders and juicers can be invaluable for chopping, grating, mixing, etc. Choose a design that is easy to operate, take apart and clean. Simple mechanical choppers or electric mixers are also available which only require one-handed operation. A hand-held 'stick blender' can be used to mix the contents of a bowl or saucepan with the press of a button.

Microwaving: A microwave can be very helpful as it reduces cooking time and cooking requires minimal handling. Proper microwave cookware, which is designed to absorb less of the cooking heat, will be cooler to handle.

Moving food and objects: Trolleys are useful for transporting hot objects from one work surface, or from one room, to another. This greatly reduces the risk of accidents. One-handed trays are also available, with a handle that rises over the centre of the tray so that it can be balanced safely with one hand. These also come with an anti-slip surface.

Eating and drinking

Plates: Plates with anti-spill raised edges are available. Alternatively, plate guards can be clipped onto most plates.

Cutlery: A wide variety of adapted cutlery is available to make eating easier, e.g. specialist knives which enable food to be cut without requiring a fork to hold it steady.

Egg cups: Egg cups with a suction base are available.

Non-slip matting: Special rubber matting is widely available which prevents plates, cups and other items from slipping around during use. Alternatively, a damp tea towel folded and placed underneath can also prevent hard objects from slipping on a smooth surface.

Housework

Washing-up: Brushes which attach by suction onto the draining board are available,



which allow you to clean pots one-handed. Alternatively, an automatic dishwasher can make life easier.

Vacuuming: Heavy vacuum cleaners are very awkward to use with one hand. Choose a light machine with a swivel-head which can be easily manoeuvred around furniture. It is helpful to clear space before beginning the job. Hand-held 'Dustbuster' vacuum cleaners, which are rechargeable, are very handy for stairs and small areas of carpet.

Laundry: Automatic washing machines are preferable, as washing by hand is obviously very difficult one-handed. For drying, it is easier to hang each garment on an indoor drying rack. Once the washing is dry, place the items on a flat surface to fold them. It can help to buy socks that are all the same so any two will make a pair rather than having to pair items up after washing.

Ironing: Again, this can be difficult using one hand. Extra care needs to be taken to avoid burns, particularly if there is any loss of sensation in either hand. It may be easier to turn the ironing board around if using a different hand from that used previously. A tumble dryer and fabric conditioner, as well as a careful choice of fabric, can help to reduce the need for ironing. Large items that need folding after ironing are best laid out flat onto a table.

Games and hobbies

Card games: Purpose-made holders are available to hold cards steady. A simple alternative is to hold the cards in the bristles of a new, upturned scrubbing-brush.

Sports: Sports can be difficult but adaptations can often be made. Racket sports only require one hand and the use of a one arm drive wheelchair can help. Alternatively, table tennis can be played from a static position. Bowling is fun and pool or snooker can also be possible with some help to get the non-functioning arm in the right place. Games related to boules can easily be played one-handed and there are playing areas in most towns and cities.

Video games: One-handed controllers are available for the Xbox, PlayStation and PC, while most games on the Nintendo Wii can be played using one hand. Joysticks are also suitable for many games and these can be attached to a table by suction pads for one-handed use.

Crafts: The biggest difficulty with most hobby activities is stabilising the components. Clamps, plasticine, non-slip matting and specialist frames can be used for needlework. A hoop that clamps onto the table is available for embroidery, as are simple threaders for sewing needles. A clamp is also available for holding a knitting needle to allow



one-handed knitting.

There are lots of resources for one-handed games at www.oneswitch.org.uk.

Conclusion

Although life with hemiplegia or hemiparesis is inevitably difficult, there are many ways to manage the everyday practical issues. We hope this factsheet has provided you with some useful ideas for yourself, a friend or relative. Remember, always ensure that the techniques you are using are safe, and if you have any questions, problems or concerns, consult an occupational therapist.

If possible, try items out before making expensive purchases, as some things will work better for some people than others. Also, some companies can charge a lot of money for items when something equally effective can often be found very cheaply. Always be wary of buying expensive equipment, especially on impulse.

To discuss any issues raised in this factsheet, or to find details of our local groups and branches, please contact the Headway helpline free of charge on 0808 800 2244 (Monday - Friday, 9am-5pm) or by email at helpline@headway.org.uk.

You can also find more information and contact details of groups and branches on our website at www.headway.org.uk/supporting-you.



Useful organisations and resources

The following companies supply specialist aids and equipment direct to the public through their catalogues. Much of the equipment described in this factsheet is also available from major online shops, such as www.amazon.co.uk and www.ebay.co.uk. Headway's Amazon shop at www.headway.org.uk/headway-amazon-shop.aspx features a selection of products suggested in this factsheet. Boots sells a range of independence aids, which you can find at www.boots.com/en/Pharmacy-Health/Health-shop/Mobility-daily-living-aids. There are also some independent disability equipment stores. See your local telephone directories or ask an OT for details.

If possible, it is advisable to consult an OT about equipment that would be most suitable for you. They may also be able to help you obtain any items which you find difficult to locate.

Assist UK

Tel: 0161 832 9757

Email: general.info@assist-uk.org

Web: www.assist-uk.org

Complete Care Shop

Tel: 0845 5194 734

Email: sales@completecareshop.co.uk

Web: www.completecareshop.co.uk

DEMAND

Tel: 01923 681 800

Email: info@demand.org.uk

Web: www.demand.org.uk

Disability Equipment Register

Tel: 01454 318 818

Email: disabreg@blueyonder.co.uk

Web: www.disabilityequipment.org.uk

Disabled Living Foundation (DLF)

Helpline: 0845 130 9177

Email: helpline@dlf.org.uk

Web: www.dlf.org.uk



Disability Supplies

Tel: 0800 0934 666

Email: sales@disabilitysupplies.com

Web: www.disabilitysupplies.com

Hearing and Mobility

Tel: 0844 888 1338

Email: customerservices@hearingandmobility.co.uk

Web: www.hearingandmobility.co.uk

Homecraft Rolyan

Tel: 08444 124 330

Web: www.homecraft-rolyan.com

Nottingham Rehab Supplies

Tel: 0845 287 2215

Email: customerservice@nrs-uk.co.uk

Occupational Therapy Product Advisory Service: 0845 121 8110

Email: productadvice@nrs-uk.co.uk

Web: www.nrs-uk.co.uk

One Switch

www.oneswitch.org.uk

Remap

Tel: 0845 130 0456

Web: www.remap.org.uk

Ricability

Tel: 020 7427 2460

Email: mail@ricability.org.uk

Web: www.ricability.org.uk

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