

Your contracture prevention passport

Therapy Services

Contracture is the shortening or stiffening of muscles and connective tissues that results in decreased range of movement at the joints. This passport will help you to prevent this from happening.

Contractures

What is a contracture?

A contracture is a loss of movement at your joint. The muscles can become stiff, the length of the muscle becomes shorter and the joint can become fixed. This can happen as a result of the combination of 2 factors:

1. **Spasticity:** This is a term used to describe the symptoms of muscle over-activity and stiffness that is caused by a stroke or other neurological condition. The muscle becomes stiff and it becomes difficult to stretch the limb through the full range of movement. Sometimes involuntary muscle contractions occur, which are known as **spasms**
2. **Immobility:** It may become more difficult to move the limbs due to weakness. If muscles are held in one position for any length of time, particularly in a bent position, then the muscles may start to shorten into this position. This can result in a contracture

Muscles can start to shorten within days, so it is important to maintain the condition of muscles to support any improvement in weakness and increase in active movement which may occur. This will also help prevent contractures developing in the future.

Usually the movements we make in our everyday activities are enough to maintain the range of movements in our muscles and joints. However, when we can not do this because the muscles are weak, there is a risk of developing contractures. There are a variety of ways this problem may be treated, which will be discussed later, but the prevention of contractures may require life-long management.

The prevention of infection is a major priority in all healthcare and everyone has a part to play.

- Please decontaminate your hands frequently for 20 seconds using soap and water or alcohol gel if available
- If you have symptoms of diarrhoea and/or vomiting, cough or other respiratory symptoms, a temperature or any loss of taste or smell please do not visit the hospital or any other care facility and seek advice from 111
- Keep the environment clean and tidy
- Let's work together to keep infections out of our hospitals and care homes.

Why is important to keep my muscles in good condition?

If muscles start to shorten it may prevent underlying return of active movement from becoming effective.

If contractures start to develop, they can result in a range of difficulties. These include: stiffness, pain, difficulty undertaking tasks such as washing, dressing and cutting nails. Lower limbs contractures may result in difficulties in walking, transferring, toileting or sitting in an upright comfortable position.

In severe cases, contractures may lead to skin breakdown, infection or breathing problems and chest infections.

What makes spasticity worse?

Bladder problems

Urinary infections are a very common cause of worsening spasm and/or stiffness. Symptoms of this can be going to the toilet more often, pain on passing urine or an unpleasant smell from your urine.

If you are experiencing any of these symptoms, ask your GP to check your urine.

The bladder not emptying fully can irritate your bladder and leave you prone to infections. If you are going to pass urine, but needing to go back shortly after, or have difficulty starting a flow of urine, ask your GP to refer you to a continence nurse for further assessment.

If your stiffness / spasm worsens it is always worth having a sample of your urine tested by your GP.

Bowel problems

Constipation or a change in your normal bowel routine is one of the most common causes of worsening spasm or stiffness.

If you have difficulty emptying your bowels, are going less frequently than normal, experiencing abdominal discomfort, or your stools are hard and difficult to pass, you could be constipated and should contact your GP.

Other bowel problems such as irritable bowel syndrome can also impact on your stiffness and spasm.

Skin problems

Irritation of the skin for example. Tight clothing, friction from new footwear or rubbing from a leg splint or urinary catheter can cause redness or blistering and an increase in your stiffness / spasm.

You must deal with the cause of skin irritation to avoid skin breakdown. If your skin is broken, you should seek advice from a health care professional.

Pressure areas on the skin affect circulation and lead to skin damage and breakdown, known as a pressure sore. This is very serious and needs immediate attention from your GP or any other professionals involved in your care. It is a good idea to check your skin on a daily basis for any signs of damage, especially if you have difficulties with the sensation of your skin.

Burns can also cause a worsening of your stiffness and spasm.

Infections

Any infection can aggravate your stiffness and spasm. These include urinary infections, chest infections, in-growing toe nails, infections in the mouth or teeth and common illnesses such as colds, flu or a stomach upset. See your GP if symptoms persist.

Pain and discomfort

Positioning: If you have difficulty changing your position in lying or sitting you may experience discomfort. This may mean that you have too much pressure on certain parts of your body which can cause worsening of your symptoms. This can also happen if you are not well-supported and are struggling to maintain your position.

Any new pain must be checked by your GP so they can prescribe appropriate pain medication or refer you for further investigation or to a specialist if required.

Excessive fatigue

If your body is **overtired**, this can temporarily worsen your symptoms. This may be due to physical tiredness, mental exhaustion or difficulty sleeping.

Extremes of temperature

Being **too hot or too cold** can cause worsening of your stiffness and spasm. Please try to avoid extremes of temperature.

Emotions

If you are feeling **stressed or anxious**, then your symptoms may worsen. Sometimes being aware of your feelings helps, but you may benefit from speaking to someone about your difficulties. You can be referred for counselling if required.

If your spasticity or stiffness suddenly gets worse, make a note of any changes to your normal routine to see if you can identify what causes your symptoms to worsen. Keep a stiffness diary for a week to monitor this.

How is spasticity and stiffness managed?

A variety of treatments may be used, depending on the severity of the spasticity. Some of these will be discussed in more detail later but include:

- **Posture management:** Careful positioning in bed and when sitting in a chair or wheelchair can help to stretch and relax the affected muscles and prevent contractures.
- **Stretching:** A slow, sustained daily stretching programme will be helpful in maintaining the condition and the length of the muscles.
- **Splinting:** A daily splinting programme may be helpful in stretching and maintaining the length of the affected muscles. If muscles have started to contract, a programme of splinting may be effective in gradually stretching out the shortened muscle to gain a better range of movement.
- When muscles have already shortened or contracted, splints may be used, for example, in the hand to prevent the hand completely closing into a fist. This will allow the hand to be cleaned and the nails cut.
- **Medication:** There are medicines that may be able to reduce the symptoms of spasticity. Pain medication may also be of benefit, if it is painful to stretch or move the muscles.
- **Botulinum toxin injections:** These injections can help to relax affected muscles by reducing some of the abnormal muscle contractions, so the muscles become less stiff. The effect takes place over a 2-week period and can last for up to 16 weeks. In order to be effective, Botulinum toxin injections are given as part of the overall management plan. If not used in conjunction with stretching / splinting / medication as appropriate, the injections will not help the muscles relax, and will not be effective in allowing the limb to be stretched out.

If the above management options are not effective, more invasive treatments may have to be considered such as surgery to lengthen tendons.

English

If you need information in another way like easy read or a different language please let us know.

If you need an interpreter or assistance please let us know.

Lithuanian

Jeigu norėtumėte, kad informacija jums būtų pateikta kitu būdu, pavyzdžiui, supaprastinta forma ar kita kalba, prašome mums apie tai pranešti.

Jeigu jums reikia vertėjo ar kitos pagalbos, prašome mums apie tai pranešti.

Polish

Jeżeli chcieliby Państwo otrzymać te informacje w innej postaci, na przykład w wersji łatwej do czytania lub w innym języku, prosimy powiedzieć nam o tym.

Prosimy poinformować nas również, jeżeli potrzebowaliby Państwo usługi tłumaczenia ustnego lub innej pomocy.

Punjabi

ਜੇ ਤੁਹਾਨੂੰ ਇਹ ਜਾਣਕਾਰੀ ਕਿਸੇ ਹੋਰ ਰੂਪ ਵਿਚ, ਜਿਵੇਂ ਪੜ੍ਹਨ ਵਿਚ ਆਸਾਨ ਰੂਪ ਜਾਂ ਕਿਸੇ ਦੂਜੀ ਭਾਸ਼ਾ ਵਿਚ, ਚਾਹੀਦੀ ਹੈ ਤਾਂ ਕਿਰਪਾ ਕਰਕੇ ਸਾਨੂੰ ਦੱਸੋ।

ਜੇ ਤੁਹਾਨੂੰ ਦੁਭਾਸ਼ੀਏ ਦੀ ਜਾਂ ਸਹਾਇਤਾ ਦੀ ਲੋੜ ਹੈ ਤਾਂ ਕਿਰਪਾ ਕਰਕੇ ਸਾਨੂੰ ਦੱਸੋ।

Romanian

Dacă aveți nevoie de informații în alt format, ca de exemplu caractere ușor de citit sau altă limbă, vă rugăm să ne informați.

Dacă aveți nevoie de un interpret sau de asistență, vă rugăm să ne informați.

Traditional Chinese

如果您需要以其他方式了解信息，如易读或其他语种，请告诉我们。

如果您需要口译人员或帮助，请告诉我们。