

# Make Your Work Match Your Abilities:

## TIPS FOR MANAGING HOUSEWORK

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Housework may pose challenges for individuals who have had a stroke. Often these challenges can be resolved with simple modifications to the task, the tools or the environment.

### LEARN FROM THE PROS

Professional housecleaning services make a plan. That same strategy can be used to tame your housework.

**LIST:** Identifying each cleaning task is the first step of the plan.

**SORT:** Once that list is complete, sort the listed tasks into two categories:

1. Tasks you can manage every time they should be done, without undue effort or risk.
2. Tasks that are just too demanding for you to do based on your current abilities and the tools currently available. This category includes activities you can do some times but not every time it needs to be done.

Focusing on the second category, there are three general strategies for addressing these problem tasks:

1. Modify the task and/or cleaning tool(s).
2. Collaborate with, or delegate to, someone else.
3. Modify the environment.

**MODIFY THE TASK AND/OR CLEANING TOOL(S):** Some cleaning tasks can be made manageable by modifying the task or the tools used.



## MODIFYING THE TASK

Modifying the task includes changing the *timing of the task*, such as splitting it into parts that are done at different times of day or even on different days. Modifying the task can also mean doing the task in a *different position*. These modifications involve minimal or no cost. They can be used temporarily or permanently. Below are some examples of modifying the task.

**TASK:** Laundry

**MODIFICATION:** Split into subtasks

**HOW/EXAMPLE:** Gather laundry, load washer in evening. Run washer in morning, move laundry to dryer. Fold, hang or sort items when dryer stops. Put clean laundry away later in the day.

**TASK:** Vacuuming or mopping

**MODIFICATION:** Change position

**HOW/EXAMPLE:** Sit in a chair, vacuum or mop all areas in reach. Move seat or move to another seat and repeat. (If wet mopping, be sure to leave a dry path for yourself or wait until floor is dry before moving.)

**TASK:** Dusting

**MODIFICATION:** Change position

**HOW/EXAMPLE:** Sit while dusting. Works especially well for dusting ceilings, ceiling fans or crown molding as well as baseboard (using a long-handled dusting tool).

**TASK:** Ironing

**MODIFICATION:** Change position

**HOW/EXAMPLE:** Sit while ironing, either by adjusting ironing board to lower setting or using a tabletop ironing board. (Hanging items right out of the dryer can also reduce or eliminate the need for ironing.)

**TASK:** Tub/shower cleaning

**MODIFICATION:** Split into subtasks

**HOW/EXAMPLE:** If you have a hand-held shower, rinse walls and shower door or curtain at end of every shower. Then use a squeegee on the walls and door. Can be done while sitting on a shower seat (use a long-handled squeegee). This can lengthen the time between necessary tub/shower cleaning.

## MODIFYING THE TOOL(S)

Modifying the tool(s) involves using a tool or tools that *reduce the risk or effort* of the task. Modifying the tool may also reduce or eliminate cleaning or caring for tools after the cleaning task is completed. Below are some examples of modifying the tools used to manage a variety of housecleaning tasks.

**TASK:** Dusting

**ALTERNATIVE TOOL:** Long or adjustable handle tool with disposable duster inserts

**WHY/HOW TO USE:** Reduce bending and reaching, ensure each cleaning session begins with a clean tool.

**TASK:** Cleaning the toilet

**ALTERNATIVE TOOL:** Disposable toilet scrubber (ejectable scrubber)

**WHY/HOW TO USE:** Simplifies the task and reduces after-task cleanup to just stowing the handle.

**TASK:** Mopping

**ALTERNATIVE TOOL:** Mop with disposable cleaning pads

**WHY/HOW TO USE:** Available for both wet and dry mopping. Reduces after-task cleanup. Some equipped with sprayer so cleaning solution can be sprayed just ahead of mop, eliminating the bucket and avoiding too much water on floor.

**TASK:** Sweeping

**ALTERNATIVE TOOL:** Freestanding, long handled dustpan

**WHY/HOW TO USE:** Eliminates bending, stooping and reaching and allows task to be done one-handed. Some standing dustpans come with a short broom; this combination is ideal for working in a seated position.

**TASK:** Washing windows

**ALTERNATIVE TOOL:** Windshield squeegee with long or adjustable handle

**WHY/HOW TO USE:** Reduce reaching or climbing on stepstool or ladder. Offers option of washing windows while seated.

**TASK:** Vacuuming

**ALTERNATIVE TOOL:** Hand vacuum/broom vacuum and combination tools

**WHY/HOW TO USE:** Reduces effort and allows task to be done one-handed or in a seated position. Broom-vac can also replace broom/dustpan combination. Hand vacuum can do cleanup on multiple surfaces. Both styles come in corded and cordless (rechargeable battery) versions, some broom-vacs come with a “lift-out” hand vacuum. Some come with attachments for upholstery or crevices.

**TASK:** Cleaning product storage/access

**ALTERNATIVE TOOL:** Shoe organizer

**WHY/HOW TO USE:** Hang the shoe organizer inside the door of the laundry room, pantry, linen closet or other door. Store cleaning sprays, dust and mop refills and smaller cleaning tools in individual pockets. If only a few pockets are needed, you can cut the unwanted pockets off of the bottom of the organizer.

**TASK:** Cleaning product transport

**ALTERNATIVE TOOL:** Apron with multiple large pockets

**WHY/HOW TO USE:** Enables you to carry small tools or cleaning products with you while keeping hands free. If you are doing laundry, dusting or sweeping and come across small items where they do not belong, stow them in a pocket to be put away later.

## CLEANING PRODUCTS

Cleaning pros use a few effective products rather than many specialty products. Here are a few things to keep in mind:

- Reduce the number of products.
- Make sure products come in containers you can easily hold and control.
- Read labels: are fumes or contact with skin a concern? Do you have to wear gloves?
- Pre-moistened pop-up cleaning wipes can simplify, but make sure the fine print indicates the wipes can be used on food preparation surfaces without having to be cleaned again with water.

## COLLABORATE OR DELEGATE

Some tasks may still be too difficult or too risky even with modifications. For these tasks, collaboration or delegation may be a more effective strategy.

**Collaborate** means you will be involved in the task, but you will do it *with someone else* or *split the task* into parts you will do and parts someone else will do. Below are some examples of collaborating on housework.

**TASK:** Washing windows

**YOU DO:** Lower panes

**YOUR COLLABORATOR DOES:** Upper panes

**TASK:** Vacuuming entire rooms

**YOU DO:** Vacuuming while seated if necessary

**YOUR COLLABORATOR DOES:** Moves furniture so you can vacuum the entire floor

**TASK:** Changing linens

**YOU AND YOUR COLLABORATOR:** Work together to install fitted sheets or place comforter in duvet

**Delegate** means that someone else will do the task. Some tasks do not lend themselves to modification. For these tasks, you will need to find a suitable compromise between how often the task is done and whom you will recruit, solicit or hire to do the job. Below are some examples of delegating housework.

**TASK:** General cleaning

**DELEGATE:** Hire a cleaning service for twice a year heavy cleaning and special jobs (washing windows, changing window coverings, carpet cleaning, etc.)

**TASK:** Turn or rotate the mattress

**DELEGATE:** Will be done by your son twice a year

**TASK:** Clean the oven

**DELEGATE:** Will be done by a friend or family member in exchange for being taken out to lunch

## MODIFYING THE ENVIRONMENT

Modifying the environment means making a permanent change that eliminates housework or reduces the effort or risk associated with it. Some of these modifications can



be made with little or no cost, but others are long-term or permanent solutions that typically involve significant expense. By listing housework tasks and analyzing your abilities and resources (including financial expense and availability of assistance), you may decide that an environmental modification, even one involving some cost, is more cost-effective and satisfying over time than trying to manage housework in the existing environment. The most significant and expensive of these modifications is moving to a different living environment. Below are some examples of modifying the environment.

**TASK:** Dusting items on surfaces

**PROBLEM:** Small items like photos or collectibles get dusty and are hard to keep clean

**MODIFICATION:** Contain these items in a dust-proof case or glass front cabinet. Case or cabinet can be dusted easily, while items inside may need to be dusted only once or twice a year.

**TASK:** Dusting window coverings

**PROBLEM:** Heavy drapes or slatted blinds collect dust that is hard to clean

**MODIFICATION:** Switch to different style of window covering with less surface area and/or less weight, such as shades or curtain panels.

**TASK:** Vacuuming

**PROBLEM:** Cannot manage regular vacuum, broom-vac not adequate on thick carpet

**MODIFICATION:** Replace carpets with bare floors or very low pile carpet that can be cleaned with broom or broom-vac.

**TASK:** Laundry

**PROBLEM:** Laundry is in another building or machines are poorly accessible

**MODIFICATION:** Move appliances to a convenient level of the home. Stacking washer/dryer will save space, but verify that you can access items in the drums AND access all controls before purchasing. Consider a front-loading machine to improve access. Front-loading appliances on pedestals enable best access from seated position or with less bending. Pedestals are typically available where appliances are sold.

**TASK:** Making/changing bed linens

**PROBLEM:** Difficult to manage all the bedding

**MODIFICATION:** Replace multiple blankets, spread and even top sheet with a comforter or duvet with a cover.

## FINALIZE AND IMPLEMENT YOUR PLAN

Once you have worked through Category 2 and identified relevant modifications, decide how often each task will be done. This plan exists to help you manage effort, time and risk associated with housekeeping. Then set a date to re-evaluate the effectiveness of your plan, ideally in one or two months. Do a trial implementation of your plan.

## RE-EVALUATE

If tasks are still taking more time and effort, or feel risky, look for other options to modify to further streamline your work and fit your needs and abilities. You may find that many tasks are easier to manage, but some may move to the collaborate/delegate category. Adapt the plan to fit your needs.

Housework is just one of many kinds of activities that can become a challenge after stroke. By adapting the activities and the environment to fit your abilities and your preferences, you can manage housekeeping your way. **SC**

### About the author...

**Carol Siebert, MS, OTR/L, FAOTA**, is an occupational therapist in Chapel Hill, N.C. In her practice, The Home Remedy, she works with individuals to simplify daily activities, manage chronic conditions and adapt their environment to best fit their abilities. She has been an occupational therapist for over 23 years.

