

THE FACTS ABOUT STROKE

Stroke is the third leading cause of death in the United States after heart disease and cancer. It is a major cause of physical and mental disabilities in older adults.

A stroke happens when blood cannot flow to a part of the brain. When the brain does not get the oxygen and nutrients it needs from the blood, its cells are damaged or begin to die. If brain cells are only damaged, they sometimes can be repaired. But brain cells that have died cannot be brought back to life. This means that the brain may stop sending signals to other parts of the body that control things like speaking, thinking and walking.

There are two major types of strokes: ischemic and hemorrhagic. Ischemic stroke is the most common kind and is caused by blood clots or the narrowing of a blood vessel leading to the brain. The clot keeps blood from flowing into other regions of the brain and prevents needed oxygen and nutrients from reaching brain cells in these regions. Hemorrhagic stroke happens when a broken blood vessel causes bleeding in the brain. This break also stops oxygen and nutrients from reaching brain cells.

Many people are familiar with the term “mini-stroke.” A “mini-stroke” is technically called a Transient Ischemic Attack (TIA). TIAs may occur when blockage of the blood vessel has not reached 100%. Though not as immediately harmful as a regular stroke, a TIA is still a medical emergency. The affects of the TIA may be fleeting but eventually may lead to a major, debilitating stroke.

Signs and symptoms of a stroke include, but are not limited to:

- Sudden numbness or weakness in the face, arm or leg - especially on one side of the body.
- Sudden confusion, trouble speaking or understanding
- Sudden problems seeing in one eye or both eyes
- Sudden dizziness, loss of balance or trouble walking

The warning signs of a stroke may last only a few minutes and then go away. Always pay attention to any stroke symptoms, even if they are fleeting. If you suspect someone may be having a stroke, the National Stroke Association recommends you act F.A.S.T.:

- **Face** - Ask the person to smile. Does one side of the face droop?
- **Arms** - Ask the person to raise both arms. Does one arm drift downward?
- **Speech** - Ask the person to repeat a simple sentence (e.g. “It’s sunny today.”). Are the words slurred? Can the person repeat the sentence correctly?
- **Time** - If the person shows any of these symptoms, time is important. Call 9-1-1 immediately!

Recovery from a stroke is most successful if treatment begins within the first 3 hours after symptoms appear. A drug that may help break down the clot, known as t-PA, can greatly lower the damage caused by a stroke; but, only patients with ischemic stroke, caused by a clot, are candidates for this treatment. A health provider will diagnose stroke based on the patient’s symptoms, medical history and medical test that look closely at the brain to see the type and location of the stroke.

There are many different ways to help people recover from a stroke. Drugs and physical therapy work to improve balance, coordination and other deficits from the stroke such as speech and language problems. Occupational therapy can make it easier to do things like bathing and cooking. Many therapies start in the hospital and continue at home. Progress is different for each person - some people recover fully soon after a stroke, other take months or even years. Sometimes the damage is so serious that therapy cannot help at all.

Talk to your health provider about what you can do to lower your risk of stroke. Even if you are in perfect health, you may have some serious risks:

- Control your blood pressure. Have your blood pressure checked often. Treating high blood pressure lowers the risk of both stroke and heart disease.
- Stop smoking. Smoking is linked to increased risk for stroke. Quitting smoking at any age lowers the risk for stroke as well as for a lot of other serious diseases.
- Exercise regularly. Activities such as brisk walking, riding a bicycle and yard work may lower the risk of both stroke and heart disease. Exercise may make the heart stronger and improve blood flow. Before any major change in your exercise routine, be sure to check with your health provider.
- Eat healthy foods. Eat foods that are low in fats, cholesterol and saturated fatty acids. Include a variety of fruits and vegetables in your daily diet.
- Control your diabetes. Untreated diabetes can damage blood vessels and lead to a build up of fatty deposits in the arteries. This narrows arteries and blocks normal blood flow.

Stroke affects many different people in many different ways. It is an especially serious condition among women and African-Americans. However, the National Stroke Association estimates that up to 80% of strokes are preventable.

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