

The family library

Understanding Strokes

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What is a stroke?

A stroke, sometimes called a “brain attack,” occurs when the blood flow to the brain is interrupted in some way. Brain cells in a specific area of the brain begin to die because they are no longer receiving the oxygen and nutrients needed to function. The blood supply to the brain can be suddenly interrupted by a blood clot that blocks a blood vessel, called an ischemic stroke, or when a blood vessel bursts, called a hemorrhagic stroke, causing sudden bleeding into or around the brain. An ischemic stroke caused by a blood clot is the most common type of stroke.

When blood flow to the brain is interrupted, some brain cells die immediately, while others remain at risk for death. With timely treatment these cells can be saved. Studies have shown that brain injury occurs within minutes of a stroke and can become irreversible within as little as one hour. Brain damage begins from the moment the stroke starts and often continues for days afterwards. There is a very short window of opportunity for treatment of most common forms of stroke.

The person having a stroke may not realize what is happening. To a bystander, the individual having a stroke may just look confused. If someone around them recognizes the symptoms and acts quickly, there is hope that the progression of damage can be stopped. Stroke is a medical emergency. Every minute counts. The longer blood flow is cut off to the brain, the greater the damage. Immediate treatment can save lives and enhance the chances for successful recovery.

The doctor may order several tests to determine if the person is having a stroke and which type of stroke it is. Treatment will depend on whether the person is having a stroke due to a blood clot or whether it is being caused by bleeding in the brain. Tests used to determine a

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stroke may include blood tests, CT Scans, or an MRI. The CT scan and MRI can help to visualize what is going on in the brain. If the stroke is being caused by a blood clot, medication can sometimes be given to dissolve the clot.

Who is at risk for stroke?

Some people are at a higher risk for stroke than others. Some risk factors cannot be changed but there are others that can be modified and the risk of stroke decreased. Risk factors that cannot be changed include:

Age – Stroke can strike all age groups but typically older people have a greater risk.

Gender – Men have a higher risk for stroke, but more women die from stroke.

Race/ethnicity – The risk for stroke varies among different ethnic and racial groups, however, the incidence of stroke among African-Americans is almost double that of white Americans.

Family history - Stroke seems to run in families. This could be due to genetic tendencies or the influence of common lifestyles that predispose a person to stroke.

Risk factors that can be controlled or changed include:

High blood pressure

Heart disease

Diabetes

High cholesterol

Lifestyle – this includes smoking, high alcohol consumption, inactivity and obesity.

Symptoms

The symptoms of stroke are distinctive because they happen quickly and many times more than one symptom occurs at the same time. They include sudden:

- numbness or weakness, especially on one side of the body
- confusion or trouble speaking or understanding speech
- trouble seeing in one or both eyes
- trouble walking, dizziness, or loss of balance or coordination
- severe headache with no known cause

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Sometimes a person will have a transient ischemic attack (TIA) or mini-stroke **prior** to having an actual stroke. This is a temporary interruption of the blood flow to an area of the brain. A TIA can be a warning sign that a person may have an actual stroke soon. The symptoms are similar to the symptoms of a stroke only they are generally temporary.

There is no way for someone to tell whether the symptoms they are experiencing are a TIA or a stroke. The symptoms could persist and lead to death or disability. Anyone experiencing symptoms of a stroke should assume that it is an emergency and should not wait to see if they go away.

Effects of a Stroke

The effects of a stroke depend on the area of the brain that was damaged and the extent of brain tissue affected. Disabilities can be mild to severe and anywhere in between. Some effects may be temporary, while others will be permanent. A stroke can affect vision, speech, behavior, thought processes, and the ability to move and function. A stroke can sometimes lead to coma and even death.

Although stroke is a disease of the brain it can affect the entire body. Some of the disabilities that can result from a stroke include:

- ✚ **paralysis** – This is a common disability resulting from a stroke. It usually affects one side of the body. A related disability that is not as debilitating as paralysis is one-sided weakness. The paralysis or weakness may affect only the face, an arm, or a leg or may affect one entire side of the body and face.
- ✚ **cognitive deficits** - Stroke may cause problems with thinking, awareness, attention, learning, judgment, and memory. A stroke patient may be unaware of his or her surroundings, and may be unaware of the mental deficits that resulted from the stroke.
- ✚ **speech problems** - Stroke patients often have problems understanding or forming speech. Speech and language problems can be extremely frustrating and frightening for the patient and family.

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- ✚ **emotional difficulties** - A stroke can lead to emotional problems. Stroke patients may have difficulty controlling their emotions or may express inappropriate emotions in certain situations. Depression is another common disability that occurs with many stroke patients.
- ✚ **daily living problems** – Because of the other effects noted, the person may need assistance completing daily living tasks such as dressing, bathing, grooming, toileting etc.
- ✚ **swallowing problems** - Some persons who have had a stroke have trouble eating and swallowing. The person may have difficulty moving food or liquid from their mouth to their stomach due to weak muscles in mouth and throat. They may also be at high risk to take food or fluid into their lungs instead of the stomach, causing a type of pneumonia.
- ✚ **pain** - Stroke patients may experience pain, uncomfortable numbness, or strange sensations after a stroke. These sensations may be due to many factors including damage to the sensory regions of the brain, stiff joints, or a disabled limb.

Treatment

Treatment depends of the severity of the symptoms and what type they are. It can include medication and/or surgery. Because permanent damage can develop within the first few hours after a stroke, it is important for treatment to begin immediately.

Sometime medications will be needed. This is especially true of strokes that are caused by blood clots. During the initial stroke a medication may be used to dissolve the clot. After the stroke, medications may be used to prevent further clots from forming.

Many times a person will need to participate in a rehabilitation program to overcome disabilities that have resulted from stroke damage. The person may need to relearn how to do activities such as walking, sitting, standing etc. They may benefit from occupational therapy to relearn how to accomplish daily living activities such as dressing, bathing, cooking, reading, and writing. Speech therapy helps relearn speech and language skills, learn alternate forms of communication if needed, and improve swallowing problems that could

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Treatment (cont.)

be caused by the stroke. It is important for rehabilitation to begin as early as possible.

What can family do?

Family support can be crucial for the person who has had a stroke. It is important to be patient and understanding with a person who has had a stroke because recovery and rehabilitation can be very frustrating. Maintain a positive and supportive attitude at all times. Encourage the person to communicate and be patient if they have difficulty expressing themselves. The speech therapist may be able to give pointers that will help.

It is important to encourage the person to do as much as they can for themselves so they can become as independent as possible. With this in mind, provide only the assistance that the person needs.

Family can be helpful in encouraging the person who has had a stroke with the exercises and therapy that they need to participate in. Families should become knowledgeable regarding the person's therapies so they can be involved when possible.

Families may also be experiencing some anxiety related to their loved ones' condition. It is important for them to take care of themselves too. This would include taking time for themselves, adequate rest, good nutrition, and exercise. The family may have many questions and the rehab team is a good source for answers. Sometimes it is just important to be able to share feelings with someone else and families need some support for that too. Support groups are a good way to meet that need. The rehab team may be able to provide information that will help find a good support group.

For more information about strokes, click [HERE](#).