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What is a stroke?

Stroke, also called cerebrovascular accident, occurs when blood flow to the brain is disrupted. Disruption in blood flow is caused when either a blood clot or piece of plaque blocks one of the vital blood vessels in the brain (ischemic stroke), or when a blood vessel in the brain bursts, spilling blood into surrounding tissues (hemorrhagic stroke).

The brain needs a constant supply of oxygen and nutrients in order to function. Even a brief interruption in blood supply can cause problems. Brain cells begin to die after just a few minutes without blood or oxygen. The area of dead cells in tissues is called an infarct. Due to both the physical and chemical changes that occur in the brain with stroke, damage can continue to occur for several days.

A loss of brain function occurs with brain cell death. This may include impaired ability with movement, speech, thinking and memory, bowel and bladder, eating, emotional control, and other vital body functions. Recovery from stroke and the specific ability affected depends on the size and location of the stroke. A small stroke may result in only minor problems such as weakness in an arm or leg. Larger strokes may cause paralysis (inability to move part of the body), loss of speech, or even death.

According to the National Stroke Association (NSA), it is important to learn the three R's of stroke:

- Reduce the risk.
- Recognize the symptoms.
- Respond by calling 911 (or your local ambulance service).

Stroke is an emergency and should be treated as such. The greatest chance for recovery from stroke occurs when emergency treatment is started immediately.

What causes a stroke?

There are three major causes of stroke that disrupt the blood supply to the brain.

Thrombosis: A blood clot forms within the wall of an artery that supplies blood to the brain. It develops over many years. This is the most common cause of stroke.

Embolus: An embolus is a wandering blood clot that lodges in a small blood vessel in the brain.

Blood flow is blocked past that point.

Cerebral Hemorrhage: When a blood vessel in the brain bursts, the surrounding brain tissue is compressed and injured by the blood flooding out of the artery. A hemorrhage may occur because of an external head injury, a bursting aneurysm, or from long-standing high blood pressure.

What are the symptoms of stroke?

The following are the most common symptoms of stroke. However, each individual may experience symptoms differently. If any of these symptoms are present, call 911 (or your local ambulance service) immediately. Treatment is most effective when started immediately.

Symptoms may be sudden and include:

- weakness or numbness of the face, arm, or leg, especially on one side of the body
- confusion or difficulty speaking or understanding
- problems with vision such as dimness or loss of vision in one or both eyes
- dizziness or problems with balance or coordination
- problems with movement or walking
- severe headaches with no other known cause

All of the above warning signs may not occur with each stroke. Do not ignore any of the warning signs, even if they go away - take action immediately. The symptoms of stroke may resemble other medical conditions or problems. Always consult your physician for a diagnosis.

What are some other symptoms of stroke?

- sudden nausea, vomiting, or fever not caused by a viral illness
- brief loss or change of consciousness such as fainting, confusion, seizures, or coma
- transient ischemic attack (TIA), or "mini-stroke"

A TIA can cause many of the same symptoms as a stroke, but TIA symptoms are transient and last for a few minutes or up to 24 hours. Call for medical help immediately if you suspect a person is having a TIA, as it may be a warning sign that a stroke is about to occur.

What is a Transient Ischemic Attack (TIA)?



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A TIA is a “warning stroke” or “mini-stroke” that produces stroke-like symptoms but no lasting damage. Recognizing and treating TIAs can reduce your risk of a major stroke.

Most strokes aren't preceded by TIAs. However, of the people who have had one or more TIAs, more than a third will later have a stroke. In fact, a person who has had one or more TIAs is more likely to have a stroke than someone of the same age and sex who has not.

What causes a transient ischemic attack?

TIAs occur when a blood clot temporarily clogs an artery and part of the brain doesn't get the blood it needs. The symptoms occur rapidly and last a relatively short time. Most TIAs last less than five minutes. The average is about a minute. Unlike stroke, when a TIA is over, there's no injury to the brain.

What are the risk factors of stroke?

- high blood pressure
- diabetes
- heart disease
- cigarette smoking
- history of transient ischemic attacks (TIAs)
- history of cerebrovascular accident (CVA)
- high red blood cell count
- high blood cholesterol and lipids
- lack of exercise, physical inactivity
- obesity
- excessive alcohol use
- drug abuse (certain kinds)
- abnormal heart rhythm
- cardiac structural abnormalities
- age
- race
- history of prior stroke
- heredity/genetics
- where a person lives
- temperature, season, and climate
- socioeconomic factors

Ways to reduce your risk of stroke:

- Maintain a regular schedule of medical check-ups.
- Monitor your blood pressure by an accurate method.
- Take medications regularly as prescribed by your physician. Do not stop taking your medication without consulting your physician.
- Maintain proper weight as determined by your medical provider.

- Exercise on a regular basis as recommended by the rehabilitation team.
- Stop smoking.
- If you are diabetic, monitor blood glucose and acetone levels.
- Monitor blood cholesterol and lipids (fats).