

“Strokes can be hard to recognize. How do I know if someone is having one?”

Remember four letters: F-A-S-T

If you know someone who has had a stroke, you probably know the damage it can cause, both mentally and physically. It can be stressful and frustrating, not only to the person who suffered the stroke, but to his or her caregivers. Being able to recognize the signs of a stroke, understand the treatment, and prepare for rehabilitation, can help you cope.

What is a stroke?

A stroke is a serious medical condition that occurs when a blood vessel in the brain is either blocked or bursts. Our brain is responsible for memory storage, emotions, thoughts, and language; as well as movements, both voluntary (walking and talking) and involuntary (breathing and digestion). A stroke can cause serious damage to the brain, affecting these abilities, especially if not addressed in a timely manner and treated properly.

Types of strokes

There are three types of strokes.

- **Ischemic stroke** is the most common. This occurs when a blood clot blocks a part of a blood vessel, and restricts blood flow to that area of the brain.
- **Hemorrhagic stroke** occurs when a blood vessel bursts as a result of a blood clot.
- **TIA (transient ischemic attack)** is when blood flow to an area of the brain is blocked, but only for a short amount of time. It is important to remember that a TIA, although temporary, is still a medical emergency, and is often a warning sign of a future stroke.

Signs and symptoms

If you think you or someone around you is having a stroke, you need to act immediately. All you need to remember are four letters, **F-A-S-T**, and three numbers, **9-1-1**.

- **F = Face.** One side of the person's face may droop or feel numb. A good way to test for this is to ask the person to smile, and check to see if it's lopsided.
- **A = Arms.** Ask the person to raise their arms and check to see if one arm starts to slowly fall downward.
- **S = Speech.** When speaking, the person's speech may be slurred or hard to understand. Ask them to repeat a simple sentence and listen carefully.
- **T = Time.** Call 9-1-1 immediately if you notice any of these symptoms.

Treatment

Patients with an **ischemic stroke** will most likely be given a medicine called r-tPA. This medication is administered via an IV in the arm and dissolves the clot in the brain, thus allowing blood flow back to the affected area.

This medication usually needs to be administered within three hours of the stroke occurring to be effective. This is why it is *extremely* important to call 9-1-1 if you believe someone is having a stroke.

However, if the blood clot is too large to be dissolved by r-tPA, it may have to be physically removed. This procedure is called a thrombectomy. Patients with a **hemorrhagic stroke** will most likely need a similar procedure.

There is usually no damage for patients who have a **TIA**. Treatment typically involves an evaluation of the cause of the TIA and medication.

Rehabilitation comes in many forms, including physical, speech and occupational therapy. It is important to remember that rehab does not reverse the effects of the stroke. The goal is to allow the patient to live as independently as possible *with* effects of the stroke by building strength, ability and confidence.

Prevention

There are certain factors you cannot control that may increase your risk of a stroke, like gender, age and ethnicity. Men are more likely to have a stroke than women. Risk increases for both men and women once they reach age 55. African-Americans are at a higher risk for stroke than any other group. But you can greatly reduce your risk by living a healthy lifestyle. In fact, 80 percent of strokes are preventable!

Factors that increase your risk of a stroke:

- High blood pressure – anything higher than 120/80 is considered elevated
- Obesity
- Smoking
- Diabetes
- Lack of exercise
- High cholesterol
- Drug and/or alcohol use

If you are dealing with one or more of these factors, speak with your doctor.

For more information about strokes, visit fallonhealth.org, click on Healthwise® Knowledgebase under Quick links, and search “strokes”.

