

2013 06.04 Health Matters Signs of a Stroke

This is Health Matters. Over the next few weeks we are reporting on strokes, what a stroke is and what causes it, stroke risk factors and preventive measures, and treatment and long term care.

Strokes are the leading cause of disability in this country, and the third leading cause of death. A stroke is a medical emergency. A person showing signs of stroke should be taken to a medical facility immediately. The sooner a stroke patient is treated, the higher the chances of surviving, and even recovering lost function. We should all know the warning signs of a stroke. There are several signs that a person is having a stroke. Speech is affected. Words come out all wrong, or are slurred. In some cases, the patient can't speak at all. The face may droop on one side. Balance is affected. A person having a stroke loses coordination and has difficulty walking. If you raise the arms above the head and one is weak, that's a sign. Body sensations are affected. There can be tingling or numbness, and memory is impaired. Vision is affected. A person having a stroke has trouble seeing with one or both eyes. A severe headache with no known cause is another sign; often a severe headache is the first sign.

Knowing these signs could save a person's life or prevent disability. Again, the signs of stroke are: 1) a severe headache; 2) difficulty seeing in one or both eyes; 3) difficulty speaking; 4) difficulty walking and keeping one's balance; 5) the face drooping on one side; 6) weakness in one arm; 7) tingling or numbness in the body; and 8) problems with remembering simple, basic things like your phone number. If you see a person exhibiting some of these signs, consider it an emergency and take whatever action is necessary to get the person to an emergency room.

A stroke is also called a brain attack. There are different types of strokes but whatever the type, the impact is the same; the brain is deprived of oxygen. Lack of oxygen can cause brain cells to die, resulting in brain damage. Neurons generally do not regenerate, so the brain cells impacted by stroke may lose function permanently unless other neurons adapt over time to carry out the lost function; and other neurons can adapt. We'll have more to say about this in a later broadcast.

A stroke happens when the brain doesn't get the oxygen it needs. Brain cells can't survive without oxygen. Arteries carry blood with its life-supporting oxygen into the brain. Abnormal events that prevent a portion of the brain from getting the oxygen cause strokes. The most common type of stroke happens when a blood clot travels into an artery. The clot blocks the flow of oxygen-rich blood to the brain cells fed by the artery.

A less common cause of stroke is a burst artery which results in blood flooding the brain. Sometimes it's an aneurysm that bursts open. An aneurysm is a weak spot in a blood vessel that balloons out and fills up with blood. Aneurysms have thin, weak walls and can rupture. Flooding the brain with blood is very dangerous; it chokes out function. A congenital malformation of the brain's arterial system can also cause a stroke. This is rare, but even though it's rare, this type of stroke is the one that impacts people during the prime years of life, from the twenties through the forties.

Whatever the cause of stroke, no two strokes are identical; partly because no two brains are identical, and partly because the impact of the stroke depends upon what part of the brain has been deprived of oxygen. The most frightening aspect of having a stroke is losing brain function and becoming disabled. To minimize this impact it is essential for the victim to receive emergency medical care as soon as possible. It's also important to know that people do recover from stroke. Healing can be a long process, but being disabled by a stroke is not inevitable. Next week we'll discuss known risk factors for stroke. We'll also discuss basic preventative measures that are well worth incorporating into your lifestyle.

Sources and Links

www.strokeawareness.com

<http://www.webmd.com/stroke/tc/stroke-symptoms>

<http://www.medicinenet.com/stroke/article.htm>

My Stroke of Insight by Jill Bolte Taylor, 2006, The Penquin Group, New York, NY