

STROKE FACTS

What is a stroke?

A stroke occurs when a blood clot or broken blood vessel does not allow the blood to flow to the brain. When this happens, the brain cells do not get enough oxygen. When a blood vessel is blocked, the part in the brain where the blockage is cannot do its job. If a stroke happens in the area of the brain that controls movement of the right arm, then that right arm will be weak or paralyzed. Without enough blood, brain cells are no longer able to produce energy- the brain cells become damaged and will die.

Stroke is a brain attack! Stroke is a medical emergency!

How do you know that you are having a stroke?

Symptoms of a stroke occur over minutes, not over hours or days

You may be having a stroke if you have any of the following:

- Sudden weakness, numbness and tingling of the face, arm and/or leg, especially on one side of the body, or difficulties using an arm and/or leg
- Sudden confusion, difficulty speaking, or loss of speech, or trouble understanding speech
- Sudden difficulty seeing, especially in one eye, or double vision
- Sudden severe headache
- Sudden trouble walking, dizziness, unsteadiness and sudden falls, especially with any of the above signs

Other important stroke symptoms include:

- Sudden nausea, fever, vomiting (occur in minutes, not hours or days)
- Brief loss of consciousness (fainting)
- Trouble breathing

If you have one or more of these signs-even if they do not cause pain or they go away- Do not wait, call 911! Treatment can be more effective if given quickly! Every minutes counts!

Are you at risk for a stroke?

If any of these applies to you, you may be at risk for a stroke...

- High blood pressure
- Diabetes
- Oral contraceptives
- Alcohol drinking
- Irregular blood test results
- Cigarette smoking
- High cholesterol
- Trauma or accident
- Family history of stroke

Stroke prevention guidelines

- Know your **blood pressure**. Have it checked at least annually, during your regular medical check-up. If it is high, work with your doctor to keep it under control
- Find out if you have any **heart problems**
- If you **smoke**, stop smoking

- If you **drink alcohol**, do so in moderation. Don't binge.
- Find out if you have **high cholesterol**
- If you have **diabetes**, follow your doctor's recommendations carefully to control your diabetes.
- **Include exercise** in the activities you enjoy in your daily routine
- Enjoy a low sodium (salt), low fat **diet**
- Ask your doctor if you have **circulation problems**, which might increase your risk for stroke

If you have any stroke symptoms, get help **right away**. Immediate medical treatment can save your life and help the chances for successful rehabilitation and recovery.

If someone is having a stroke, what can be done about it?

It is now widely recognized that **early and aggressive treatment** of stroke can prevent or minimize the amount of damage done to the brain. For example, in the case of strokes that are caused by a blood clot, "clot-busting" drugs can sometimes be used to improve blood flow to the brain. These drugs, however, will only be used if:

- they can be **given within 3 hours of when the stroke symptoms started**
- the person has no allergies or risk factors that would prevent the use of the drug (e.g. risk for bleeding)

Other things that can be done (and work best if done early) are:

- treatment of high blood pressure
- treatment of the situation that is contributing to the formation of blood clots (e.g. an irregular heart beat)
- removal of the build up of blood (hematoma) that can occur in a hemorrhagic stroke

Do strokes only happen to old people?

No, strokes occur in people of all ages, even babies. It is true, however, that 2/3 of strokes occur in people over 65 years of age. The other 1/3 of strokes occurs mostly in the 35-65 year age group.

Is the damage done by a stroke permanent?

This statement can be both true and not true. While it **is true** that the brain cells that die as a result of a stroke will never recover, it **is not true** that some of the effects of a stroke, such as inability to move an arm or leg or to speak, will be permanent. This is because, over time, certain brain cells can "learn" to take over the functions that were once done by the parts of the brain that were damaged. This is not always the case, however. The recovery of function is a very individual thing and depends, among other things, on the area of the brain that was damaged and how much damage has occurred.

Where can I find more information?

Speak with your family doctor, or for 24-hour nurse advice and health information, call Health Link Alberta at 1-866-408-LINK (5465) toll-free. Mandarin Health Link Calgary 403-943-1554, Cantonese Health Link Calgary 403-943-1556

Sources: Healthlink website www.healthlinkalberta.ca
Stroke, Health Information, Alberta Health Services

For previous 'Road to Healthy Living' series articles and health information in your own language, please visit www.calgaryhealthregion.ca/programs/diversity/multilingual_health_services.htm