

## Ask a Nurse with Isabel Clark

Call 943-LINK (5465) Mandarin Health Link 943-1554 Cantonese Health Link 943-1556



# Time is brain

## Quick action improves chances of recovery for stroke patients

### Q: What is a stroke?

**A:** A stroke occurs when the blood supply is blocked to any part of the brain. Blood is carried to the brain through many arteries (blood vessels). If the flow of blood through these vessels is stopped for longer than a few seconds, brain cells can die. There are three types of stroke:

**Ischemic stroke:** About 80 per cent of patients with a stroke suffer an ischemic stroke (blood clot). It occurs when a blood vessel in the brain is blocked. The brain cells in this area die from lack of oxygen and nutrients, which causes permanent damage.

**Transient ischemic attack:** This is also known as a TIA, warning stroke, or “mini stroke.” The blood flow to the brain is temporarily blocked. It is the same as an ischemic stroke except that the symptoms usually go away within an hour. The average TIA lasts about 15 minutes. Do not ignore a TIA. It is very important to get medical attention right away because the risk of suffering a major stroke in the next seven days is about five to 10 per cent.

**Hemorrhagic stroke:** This is potentially the most devastating type of stroke. It occurs when a blood vessel breaks and spills blood in the brain. Blood can cause damage and death of the brain cells. Common causes are high blood pressure and blood vessels that did not form correctly before you were born. According to the Heart and Stroke Foundation, about 20 per cent of strokes are hemorrhagic.

### Q: How does a stroke affect the brain?

**A:** A stroke causes a sudden loss of brain function and can strike at different areas of the brain with various effects, depending on where in the brain the stroke occurs. Effects include: weakness or paralysis in arms and legs or on one side of the body; vision and speech problems; difficulty understanding, remembering and learning new things.

### Q: What are the warning signs of a stroke?

**A:** Warning signs may include the following: sudden weakness, loss of muscle strength, numbness and/or tingling of the face, arm or leg; sudden trouble speaking, understanding or confusion; sudden loss and/or trouble with vision, particularly in one eye, or double vision; sudden severe and unusual headache; dizziness, unsteadiness or sudden falls with any of the above signs.

### Q: Can I take steps to reduce the risk of stroke?

**A:** Yes. Here are some tips for reducing your risk of stroke:

- Know your blood pressure. High blood pressure often has no symptoms so have it checked at least once a year.
- If you smoke - stop. Talk to your health-care provider about ways to help you quit.
- Limit your alcohol intake to one to two drinks per day to a weekly maximum of nine for women and 14 for men. If you have high blood pressure, talk to your doctor about whether it is safe for you to drink alcohol.
- Get your cholesterol checked. High cholesterol can lead to a build up of plaque in the artery walls and narrow your arteries. This is called atherosclerosis and can make it harder for blood to flow through your heart and body, putting you at increased risk of circulatory problems, heart disease and stroke.
- Diabetes increases the risk of high blood pressure, atherosclerosis, coronary artery disease and stroke, especially if your blood sugar levels are poorly controlled. If you have diabetes, work with the health professionals involved in your care so that you can achieve good control of your blood sugar.
- Get active. Include exercise in the activities you enjoy in your daily routine.

- Control your weight and eat a balanced, healthy diet. Refer to Canada’s Food Guide to Healthy Eating for more information.
- Use stress-busting techniques to reduce stress. It’s hard to live in a healthy way if you have too much stress.

### Q: Should I see a doctor if I have signs of a stroke? What are the odds for recovery?

**A:** When it comes to treating stroke, time is of the essence. Often a person goes to bed feeling fine but wakes up in the morning with one or more of the signs listed above. No matter what time of the day you have signs, call 9-1-1 right away.

The Calgary Health Region has developed an effective program for treating stroke patients, involving the use of thrombolytic drugs such as t-PA. These clot-busting drugs work well for people who are having an ischemic stroke and must be given within three hours of the onset of symptoms. However, clot-busters are not safe for all patients. It is critical that you get to the hospital right away so the doctors can determine what kind of stroke is occurring and what treatment is best.

Any major illness can change your life and almost all stroke survivors will have some recovery. Patients treated quickly with clot-busting drugs stand a very good chance of making a full recovery. A team of health-care professionals skilled in stroke rehabilitation, plus support from your friends and family will help you to make the best recovery.

*Isabel Clark is a telehealth nurse with Calgary Health Link.*

**FYI**

For more information about strokes, visit: [www.heartandstroke.ca](http://www.heartandstroke.ca)  
 You can speak to a registered nurse 24 hours a day, seven days a week by calling Calgary Health Link: Calgary: 403-943-5465  
 Or toll free: 1-866-408-5465