

Stroke

What is a stroke?

A stroke is a brain attack! It is one of the leading causes of death and disability in South Africa. It occurs when the blood supply, oxygen and nutrients are stopped from reaching a part of the brain. When this happens, that portion of the brain becomes damaged and begins to die.

What causes the stroke?

A burst or clogged blood vessel leading to the brain could cause a stroke. A **cerebral infarction** occurs when a blood clot blocks a vessel in the brain. Most strokes are caused by a blocked artery, which is usually as a result of the build up of fatty material in the walls of arteries. A **cerebral haemorrhage** is a stroke where an artery in the brain bursts, flooding the surrounding tissue with blood.

How do I prevent stroke?

There are some factors in your life that you cannot change and some people are born with a greater risk of stroke:

- Age (the older you get, the greater your risk).
- Family history of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, high blood pressure or stroke.

Other people increase their risk through poor lifestyle. Luckily, you can control these risk factors:

- High blood pressure - have your blood pressure measured regularly and treat it if above 140/90.
- Current heart disease - should be controlled under medical guidance.
- Being overweight - lose weight by following a healthy, balanced energy-controlled eating plan.
- High blood cholesterol - keep it under 5 mmol/l by eating a healthy, balanced diet low in saturated fat.
- Diabetes - healthy diet and medication (if necessary) is essential for control of blood sugar.
- Physical inactivity - do regular physical exercise (minimum of 30 minutes, most days of the week).

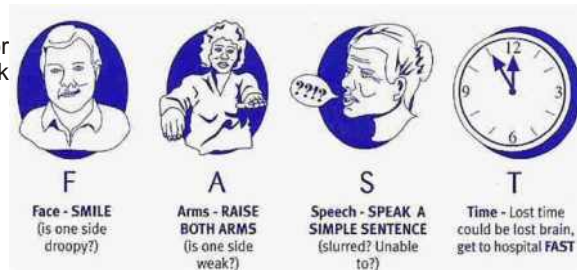
- If you smoke - stop! (Oral contraceptives may predispose stroke in women over 35 years who smoke).
- Excessive alcohol consumption increases your risk 10-fold. If you do drink, do so in moderation (not more than 1 drink for women or 2 drinks for men per day. One drink is equal to 340ml beer, 120ml of wine or 25ml of spirits).

Warning signs of stroke

If you or a family member has a family history of heart disease/stroke OR if you have one or two risk factors for the development of the disease, it is important that you recognise the warning signs of a stroke - so that you know what to do when it is taking place.

Look out for SUDDEN:

- Weakness or numbness in the face, arm or leg on one side of the body.
- Confusion.
- Loss of speech, or trouble speaking or understanding speech.
- Trouble seeing in one or both eyes.
- Unexplained dizziness.
- Loss of balance or trouble with walking.
- Severe and unusual headache.



When one or more of these symptoms is experienced, get immediate medical attention - medical help is most important in the first few hours. If the person becomes unconscious, call an ambulance immediately.

TIA - a vital warning sign

About 10% of strokes are preceded by 'temporary' or 'mini' strokes. These are referred to as TIA's (transient ischaemic attacks) and have the same symptoms as a stroke, but are less severe.

They usually last from only a few minutes to a few hours, but are temporary and do not cause long-term damage to the brain. It is **very important** that this warning sign is not ignored, as it could be an indicator of a future stroke. Prompt medical attention can prevent a fatal or disabling stroke.

Effects of a stroke

Different areas of the brain control various functions of the body including movement, speech, hearing and sight. A stroke causing damage to these areas of the brain will affect the functions they regulate.

Consequently, some parts of the body may be paralysed and problems with speech may be experienced. Stroke affects people differently, but many make a good recovery. Many stroke survivors are able to return to an active and fulfilling lifestyle!

The rehabilitation process

The extent and rate at which people recover from a stroke varies greatly, but most progress takes place in the first 18 months after the stroke. Some people will find that their symptoms improve considerably in the early weeks after their stroke, while recovery in the subsequent months may be more gradual.

For a successful recovery, stroke survivors may benefit from the help of a rehabilitation team including: physiotherapist, occupational therapist, dietician, speech therapist and social worker. Often old skills are lost and new ones need to be taught.

The goal of rehabilitation should be for the person who has had the stroke to be as independent and productive as soon as possible. The support and co-operation of family and friends is essential in the recovery process.

General tips for recovery

- Have adequate rest in the early days after your stroke.
- Take each day as it comes and set small realistic goals.
- Do things at your own pace.
- Revive old interests or take up a new hobby or activity.

Dietary concerns after a stroke

Chewing and swallowing difficulties (dysphagia) are common complaints after a stroke. To prevent a stroke survivor from becoming malnourished and to ensure that dietary intake is adequate, it may be necessary to consult a dietician and/or speech therapist.

Various adaptations may be necessary as certain consistencies and textures of foods may not be tolerated. In some cases specialised eating utensils may be required.

How do I prevent a second stroke?

By positively managing your risk factors, you can reduce the chance of having another stroke. It is important to take your medication regularly and as prescribed by your doctor.

Is there a cure for stroke?

There are drugs that can be given in certain circumstances in the early stages of a stroke. Surgery may benefit only a small group of people. Rehabilitation plays a crucial role in helping stroke survivors to regain as much independence as possible.

This is one in a series of brochures. For the full series and more heart smart information call the Heart Mark Diet Line on 0860 223 222 or visit www.heartfoundation.co.za.