## THE STROKE STORY: FOR PEOPLE WITH STROKE & THEIR CAREGIVERS

The brain is a remarkable and highly sensitive part of the body. It's a complex organ, weighing only about three pounds but it's the body's "mastermind." Your brain controls, monitors and regulates your speech, movement, thoughts, and actions. It keeps your heart beating and your lungs functioning. The brain manages memory, the ability to learn new things, stand, sit, walk, run, taste, feel, and smell. It's your brain that makes it possible for you to see.

Because it is enclosed by the thick bones of your skull, the brain's sensitive tissues are protected from most outside injuries. However your brain (and you) are at risk for interior injuries call strokes or "brain attacks."

There are two kinds of strokes:

- Ischemic strokes caused by blood clots that block a brain artery.
- Hemorrhagic strokes when an artery in the brain ruptures.

Stroke is the third leading cause of death in the US after heart disease and cancer. It can occur at any age – even in children and babies – but is most frequent in older people.

## SYMPTOMS OF STROKES

The most common signs of stroke are:

- Sudden numbness, paralysis or weakness in the face, arm or leg especially on one side of the body.
- Sudden difficulty walking, dizziness, loss of balance or coordination.
- Sudden confusion, slurred speech, difficulty talking.
- Sudden difficulty seeing in one or both eyes.
- Sudden headache -- the worst headache ever; facial pain, stiff neck, vomiting, loss of consciousness.

These symptoms may also be caused by a related condition called a transient ischemic attack or TIA. If your older family member experiences any of these symptoms don't wait to see if symptoms "get better" or disappear quickly without treatment. Call 911 immediately. Prompt care and treatment can prevent damage to the brain and save a stroke victim's life.

# TRANSIENT ISCHEMIC ATTACKS (TIAS)

TIAs are "ministrokes" that result from a temporary decrease in blood flow to the brain. These episodes cause symptoms similar to a stroke but disappear within a few minutes. Although they don't harm the brain and go away by themselves, TIAs should not be ignored. They are signs that a broken blood vessel or blood clot is preventing an adequate blood flow to the brain for short periods of time. Although these symptoms disappear quickly, they increase your older relative's risk for a future stroke. Notify your parent's regular doctor about the event and arrange for a follow-up visit as quickly as possible.

### **RISK FACTORS FOR STROKES**

The most common risks for stroke include:

- Family history of stroke, heart attack or transient ischemic attack.
- Age 55 or older.
- History of high blood pressure or heart disease.
- Smoking.
- History of diabetes.
- Overweight.
- High levels of homocysteine, an amino acid, in the blood.
- Use of birth control pills or other hormone treatments.
- Heavy drinking, illegal drug use.

## **DIAGNOSING STROKE**

It is important to identify the kind of stroke that occurred and the parts of the brain that may have been injured so that treatment and rehabilitation can begin as quickly as possible. In addition to a thorough physical exam and lab tests, your parent will also undergo additional diagnostic procedures including:

- CAT scan (computed tomography scan), x-rays and other imaging tests to identify possible causes of the stroke, its location and the extent of brain injury.
- Electroencephalograms to monitor brain activity.
- Evoked response tests that track how the brain processes hearing, speech and other sensory information.
- Ultrasounds that track blood flow through arteries in the neck.
- Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) to identify damaged areas of the brain
- Echocardiography to locate blood clots

#### **EFFECTS OF STROKE**

It's critical for someone who has suffered a stroke to get medical care as soon as possible. Strokes can cause a wide range of physical, mental and emotional health problems and disabilities depending on the extent of the stroke and what parts of the brain the stroke affected.

Common stroke-related disabilities include:

- Difficulty speaking or finding the right words
- Depression; emotional problems
- Difficulty controlling emotions
- Trouble swallowing
- Forgetfulness
- Pain and numbness

- Inability to walk or difficulty walking, balance problems
- Weakness or paralysis on one side of the body
- Memory loss, difficulty understanding ideas and concepts
- Difficulty eating, getting dressed, and other activities of daily living
  The good news is that many people recover successfully from stroke-related
  disabilities if treatment and rehabilitation begin soon after the stroke occurs.

### PREVENTING FUTURE STROKES

Families can be a strong source of support in helping an older family member prevent a stroke and lead a healthier life. High blood pressure, diabetes, circulation disorders and irregular heartbeat can increase the risk of stroke. They can also be managed with medications prescribed by your parent's doctor and some simple lifestyle changes.

- Encourage your parent to stop smoking and limit alcohol drinking.
- Buy your parent a home blood pressure monitor. They are inexpensive, easy to use and a good way to track blood pressure regularly. Available at pharmacies or ask your parent's doctor for information.
- Help him remember to take medications exactly as prescribed by the doctor.
- Make sure he or she keeps regular medical appointments.
- Work mild to moderate exercise into your parent's daily routine and yours!
- Prepare meals with lots of fresh fruits, vegetables, low-fat fish and meats.
- Reduce salt, fat and sugar intake.

Encourage your family member to schedule regular checkups with his physician. The doctor can evaluate your parent's overall condition and recommend changes in your parent's medication, diet or physical activities to prevent a future stroke.

## LIVING WITH STOKE - ONE DAY AT A TIME

It may take months or even years for someone to recover from a stroke – and some people never fully recover. If the stroke was severe your family member may face many significant physical, mental and emotional challenges each day.

To help your parent and yourself learn how to cope with the effects of a stroke find out if there are stroke support groups in your area. These groups are great ways to meet other people who have suffered strokes, share your experiences, and learn more about coping with stroke, its causes and treatments.

To find a group in your area contact local hospitals in your area or the American Stroke Association at <a href="www.strokeassociation.org">www.strokeassociation.org</a> for information about groups and other stroke-related subjects.[1045/1/10]