

Stroke

WHAT IS A STROKE?

A stroke is when a part of the brain suddenly becomes unable to function. This is due to a lack of oxygen, and so all strokes have the common factor of disease affecting the blood supply to the brain. This usually occurs with little or no warning, and causes weakness and paralysis of any part of the body depending on the part of the brain affected. In the UK, someone has a stroke every 5 minutes.

WHAT CAUSES A STROKE?

The main cause of a stroke is a blockage to the blood flow, or the bursting of an artery to the brain. When an artery is blocked, this is called a cerebral infarction. When there is bleeding into the brain, it is called a cerebral haemorrhage. There is a third kind of stroke, called an embolic stroke. This is where a blood clot travels through the body and blocks an artery in the brain to form a plug, or embolism. The diseases which cause strokes are similar to those which cause heart disease. Arteries in the brain may block due to them being furred up by fatty material in the same way that heart arteries become blocked and cause heart attacks.

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS?

Any symptoms that occur after a stroke are immediate, and depend both on the area of the brain involved and the degree of damage caused. The commonest symptom is weakness or paralysis of one side of the body. There may be loss of sensation and movement of part of an arm or leg, or complete loss of any function along one side of the body. Speech is often affected, along with facial weakness and tingling or numbness of the face. If the stroke affects the base of the brain, there may be problems with swallowing, breathing and consciousness. Some patients have a warning attack some time before a major stroke. This is often in the form of a short-lived weakness or numbness down one side, or a temporary problem with speaking. These are called TIAs – transient ischaemic attacks – and are usually completely better within 24 hours.

WILL I HAVE ANY TESTS OR INVESTIGATIONS?

If a stroke is suspected, you may be referred for a CT scan. This will confirm whether a stroke is due to a clot or bleeding. You may also require a soundwave test (known as a carotid ultrasound) which looks at the arteries in the neck to see if there is any kind of blockage there. A neurologist (specialist in brain disorders) may assist in the diagnosis and management of stroke patients.

WHAT TREATMENT MIGHT I NEED?

Aspirin may be started, and in some cases Warfarin (blood thinning drug) maybe used. Any rise in blood sugar level, which often occurs after a stroke, will be closely controlled. Oxygen may be needed in the early stages to try to minimise the brain damage. You should be reviewed regularly by your doctor or nurse (at least annually – six monthly in some cases).

CAN I DO ANYTHING TO HELP MYSELF?

It is important to stop smoking and ensure good diabetic control (if you are diabetic). It is also necessary to control your blood pressure and the level of cholesterol in the blood either by diet or tablets.

See our tips for Staying Healthy.

Tell your doctor

- Did your symptoms occur suddenly?
- Do you smoke?
- Does anyone else in your family have similar problems?
- Have you been treated for high blood pressure in the past?
- Have you ever had what seemed like stroke symptoms, but which have disappeared after 24 hours?

Ask your doctor

- Am I at risk of a further stroke?
- How often will I need my blood pressure checked?
- What help can I get at home to help me with mobility and my daily activities?
- If I am able to do them, will activity or exercise hurt me?
- Will I need to stay on Aspirin or other tablets for life?