

Stroke: Heed the Warning Signs

A stroke is a “brain attack” in the same way as a blockage of blood flow to the heart is a “heart attack.” A stroke happens when an area of the brain is without enough blood flow. That happens when blood vessels are blocked by a clot or have become too narrow (usually from buildup of cholesterol and hardening of the arteries), for blood to pass through. A stroke may also occur when a blood vessel bursts and leaks blood into the brain.

When blood flow to the brain stops suddenly, a person will have severe symptoms and will probably fall unconscious. The brain relies on the blood sugar (glucose) and oxygen carried by blood cells for energy. Brain cells will die after about four minutes without these nutrients. The brain is not like other body tissues that have the ability to repair themselves over time. Cells in the brain are highly specialized and less able to recover.

Warning signs of a stroke are too often ignored, and this can lead to very damaging consequences. They include: 1) Sudden weakness, numbness or paralysis of the face or any limb, 2) Sudden problems speaking or understanding speech, 3) Sudden blindness in an eye, 4) Sudden dizziness or problems with balance and coordination, and 5) Sudden difficulty swallowing (Burkman, 1998).

During a Transient Ischemic Attack (TIA), which is often called a mini-stroke, blockage of the artery is temporary and the symptoms go away within 24 hours. These are “red flag” warning signs of strokes to come. Medical evaluation is needed at this early stage, to prevent the permanent brain damage of real strokes. Medication to prevent clots, control diabetes and high blood pressure or atrial fibrillation may be prescribed.

If you have high blood pressure and a stroke, you have only fifty percent chance of living (Groer, 2001). Lifestyle adjustments like increasing exercise, losing weight if you are obese, improving diet by lowering salt and cholesterol, drinking alcohol in moderation, and quitting smoking can make a huge difference in your risk of a stroke (National Stroke Association, 1999).

When a stroke is from a clot or blockage, there is a new “clot-busting” drug available, which must be given within 3 hours in order to be effective (The Brain Matters campaign, 2002). Surgery may sometimes be done to clean out blockages in arteries to prevent further strokes.

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Some people need emergency surgery to treat hemorrhagic stroke (from blood leaking into the brain), and every minute counts while brain cells are dying. Do not delay if you or someone you know has warning signs of a stroke or TIA!

References:

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