



Are you at risk of Stroke?

Quality Assurance Director, Paula Beaney gives advice on how to minimise your risk where you can, how to spot a stroke in progress and dealing with life afterwards:



What is stroke?

Stroke is the 4th biggest killer in the UK but many people don't realise just how prevalent the disease is. Stroke occurs approximately 152,000 times a year in the UK; that's one every 3 minutes 27 seconds. There are 1.2 million stroke survivors in the UK and half of them have a disability as a result.

A stroke is usually caused by a blockage of a blood vessel to part of the brain, although in a small number of cases, it can be caused by an area of bleeding into the brain. When the flow of blood to any part of the brain is interrupted, brain cells are deprived of the oxygen and nutrients which they need. Some brain cells become damaged and others die.

Who is most at risk?

It's very important to remember that a stroke can affect anyone but they are most prevalent in older people. In fact, the risk of stroke doubles every decade after the age of 55. Men are at a 25% higher risk of having a stroke and at a younger age to women.

Smokers and heavy drinkers along with those with high cholesterol levels are more at risk. Being overweight and obese dramatically increases your risk of stroke.

Other factors that increase the risk of stroke include high blood pressure, diabetes, an irregular heartbeat, a hole in the heart and sickle cell disease so if you do suffer with any of these it's important to get regular health checks from a qualified professional.

What are the signs you should look out for in yourself or others?

There's a very good acronym for looking out for signs of a stroke - **FAST**. It stands for: **FACE-ARMS-SPEECH-TIME**. What do I mean by that?

FACE: Can the person smile? Is their face wonky? One side

of their mouth and/or one eye may be drooping **ARMS:**

Can the person raise both arms and keep them held up?

SPEECH: Can they speak clearly? Is their speech slurred or garbled? Can they understand what you say?

TIME: If you see ANY of these symptoms you MUST dial 999 and say you think the person is having a stroke.

Remember, **FAST: FACE-ARMS-SPEECH-TIME**.



What should you do if you see signs that someone is having a stroke?

Acting quickly is the single most important thing to do if you think someone is having a stroke. Look out for the signs and call 999 immediately. It doesn't matter if you are not 100% certain or don't see all of the signs together – getting urgent medical attention ensures the best possible chance of recovery and could even save someone's life.

Can you reduce the risk of stroke?

Yes! Tragically, up to 80% of all strokes could be prevented if we all took some simple steps to reducing our own personal risks.

Drinking alcohol and smoking are two of the biggest contributing factors to an increased risk of stroke. In fact, smoking single-handedly doubles your risk of death from stroke. Quitting smoking and limiting your alcohol consumption is great for your overall health and to prevent the most common killers like heart disease and cancer, not just stroke.

We all know we're supposed to exercise to maintain overall health but in actual fact doing so reduces the risk of stroke by up to 27%. Regular, moderate exercise is proven to be as important to stroke prevention as medication.

Eating more fruit and veg is another scientifically proven way of reducing the risk of stroke. There is a clear 'dose related' link between the two. So... the more you eat, the lower your risk.

What are some of the problems you can experience after a stroke?

The effect of a stroke on a person depends on which part of the brain has been affected and how much damage has been caused. This is why no two stroke victims are the same and why recovery is so variable.

Strokes can cause major and minor disabilities. Half of all survivors have a disability as a direct result of their stroke. The brain has two sides, so depending on which side of the brain is affected, the symptoms will be exhibited on the opposite side of the body.

Stroke can affect walking, talking, speech, balance, coordination, vision, spatial awareness, swallowing, bladder control and bowel control. As a result, over a third of stroke survivors will be discharged from hospital needing some help with the most basic of day-to-day tasks.

What are some of the problems you can experience after a stroke?

In the majority of cases, life will not be the same again after a stroke. Most people will begin their recovery in hospital for anything up to a few months until they are well enough



to be allowed home. That doesn't mean they will be fully recovered and they will need ongoing support, it is likely, for the rest of their life.

What support is someone who has suffered a stroke likely to need?

Depending on the severity, a person's home may need adapting to accommodate things like a wheelchair, visual impairment and reduced mobility.

Day-to-day tasks can be difficult for most people to manage at first so be prepared for someone to need help with things like washing, dressing, cooking and getting out and about.

Even in less severe cases, coping once back at home can be very difficult, particularly if a person lives on their own. In those circumstances there are three main options:

- 1) A family member may be able to take time off work or away from their own family to stay in the home and care for their loved one. This is a very big commitment and should be given a lot of thought by both parties before deciding to go ahead.
- 2) They may have to go into a residential care home for a period of time to be cared for.
- 3) They can also be cared for in their own home just as effectively by a live-in carer. This is becoming the first choice for many people, particularly since the costs are comparable.

Paula summarises...

Don't forget that someone who has suffered a stroke is also going to need a lot of emotional support. It is likely they will feel angry, frustrated and often helpless. If a family member chooses the role of carer it is likely that they too will experience a wide range of similar emotions alongside their loved one.

Stroke is devastating, there are no two ways about it. Survivors will need physical and emotional support for much of their lives. It's vital that we all take what steps we can to reduce our own risks. Medical advances mean that recovery rates are constantly increasing and mortality rates decreasing.

However, the impact on lives – survivors and their loved ones - shouldn't be underestimated. If your loved one is recovering, patience and understanding are crucial as well as seeking help when and where it is needed. There are lots of professionals out there, just like myself, who can offer guidance and support so please do reach out to us. Don't suffer in silence.

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