Patient Handout

NOTES

Your doctor or therapist has given you this patient education handout to further explain or remind you about an issue related to your health. This handout is a general guide only. If you have specific questions, discuss them with your doctor or therapist.

Heeding Stroke's Warning Signs

Stroke is the third leading cause of death in the United States, affecting nearly 700,000 Americans annually.

But you can prevent its devastating effects through prevention and by reacting quickly to your body's warning signs.

In fact, calling 911 and receiving medical treatment within the first three hours of symptoms can reduce damage to both the body and brain.

Below are guidelines to help you prevent a stroke and recognize the warning signs.

Are You At Risk?

Stroke can affect anyone. But if you're 55 years or older, black or have a family history of stroke, you're at greater risk. While these factors might be unmanageable, many other factors are under your control. They include:

High blood pressure (hypertension). High blood pressure is the leading cause of stroke. If the top number on your blood pressure reading is regularly more than 135 or if the bottom number is regularly more than 85, consult your health care provider. Your blood pressure probably needs to be controlled through medication or another treatment plan.

Atrial fibrillation (AF, or irregular heartbeat). AF causes more blood to collect in your heart's chambers, which can lead to blood clots and stroke. By checking your pulse, health care providers can determine whether you have an irregular heartbeat and offer appropriate treatment.

Smoking. If you smoke, you're doubling your stroke risk. Quitting right away will considerably reduce this risk.

Excessive alcohol. More than two drinks a day can increase your risk for stroke by about 50 percent.

High cholesterol. Have your cholesterol checked with a blood test to see if your "bad cholesterol" (low-density lipoprotein, or LDL cholesterol) level is high. If it is more than 200, consult with your health care provider about reducing it. In most cases, maintaining a healthy diet can help significantly.

Diabetes. If you have diabetes, follow your diet and your health care provider's fitness instructions to reduce your stroke risk.

Inactivity. Engaging in activities such as walking, biking or swimming for as little as 30 minutes a day may be enough to reduce your stroke risk. If you have a history of stroke or another disability, however, instability with gait and balance might make it difficult to exercise. In these cases, choose equipment, such as recumbent bikes, that provide stability and easy transfers to and from wheelchairs.

Excessive salt and fat. Cutting down on salt and fat can help lower blood pressure and the risk for stroke.

Circulation problems. Sickle cell anemia, severe anemia, atherosclerosis and other circulation diseases can interrupt the flow of blood to the brain, which could lead to stroke. Your health care provider can test to see if you have a circulation problem and offer ways to treat it.

Obesity. If you are obese or overweight, you're increasing strain on your circulatory system. This puts you at higher risk for high cholesterol, high blood pressure and diabetes—factors that can cause stroke.

Stroke history. If you've previously had a stroke, you're more at risk for another one. Follow your post-stroke treatment plan to help reduce these risks.

Sleep disorders. Sleep apnea, a breathing disorder that occurs during sleep, increases blood pressure rates, which is a risk for stroke. An early diagnosis of this disorder, however, can help reduce this risk greatly.

Symptoms of Stroke

While prevention is key, it's also vital to recognize stroke's symptoms. Below are the five most common ones.

- Numbness or weakness in your face, arm or leg—especially on one side of the body;
- Confusion, trouble speaking or understanding people speaking to you;
- Problems seeing in one or both eyes;
- Trouble walking, dizziness, loss of balance or coordination;
- Severe headache with no known cause.

Other stroke symptoms you should look out for include sudden nausea, fever and vomiting, and a brief loss of consciousness, such as fainting, confusion, convulsions or coma.

If you experience any of the above symptoms, don't waste any time. Call 911 immediately.

Information adapted from the American Stroke Association accessed via www.strokeassociation.org

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