

TIAs and Stroke

There are two kinds of stroke. The most common kind of stroke, called ischemic stroke, is caused by a blood clot that blocks or plugs a blood vessel in the brain. The other kind of stroke, called hemorrhagic stroke, is caused by a blood vessel that breaks and bleeds into the brain.

A Transient Ischemic Attack (TIA) is a transient stroke that lasts only a few minutes. It occurs when the blood supply to part of the brain is briefly interrupted. TIA symptoms, which usually occur suddenly, are similar to those of stroke but do not last as long. Most symptoms of a TIA disappear within an hour, although they may persist for up to 24 hours. Symptoms can include: numbness or weakness in the face, arm or leg, especially on one side of the body; confusion or difficulty in talking or understanding speech; trouble seeing in one or both eyes; and difficulty with walking, dizziness, or loss of balance and coordination.

Because there is no way to tell whether symptoms are from a TIA or an acute stroke, patients should assume that all stroke-like symptoms signal an emergency and should not wait to see if they go away. A prompt evaluation (within 60 minutes) is necessary to identify the cause of the TIA and determine appropriate therapy. Depending on a patient's medical history and the results of a medical examination, the doctor may recommend drug therapy or surgery to reduce the risk of stroke in people who have had a TIA. The use of antiplatelet agents, particularly aspirin, is a standard treatment for patients at risk for stroke. People with atrial fibrillation (irregular beating of the heart) may be prescribed anticoagulants.

TIAs are often warning signs that a person is at risk for a more serious and debilitating stroke. About one-third of those who have a TIA will have an acute stroke some time in the future. Many strokes can be prevented by heeding the warning signs of TIAs and treating underlying risk factors. The most important treatable factors linked to TIAs and stroke are high blood pressure, cigarette smoking, heart disease, carotid artery disease, diabetes and heavy use of alcohol. Medical help is available to reduce and eliminate these factors. Lifestyle changes such as eating a balanced diet, maintaining healthy weight, exercising, and enrolling in smoking and alcohol cessation programs can also reduce these factors.

Each year in the United States, there are more than 700,000 strokes. Stroke is the third leading cause of death in the country. Stroke causes more serious long-term disabilities than any other disease. Nearly three-quarters of all strokes occur in people over the age of 65. The risk of having a stroke more than doubles each decade after the age of 55. For African Americans, stroke is more common and more deadly—even in young and middle-aged adults—than for any other ethnic or racial group. Learning about stroke can help you act in time to save a relative, co-worker or friend.

The warning signs of stroke are similar to the symptoms of TIAs. If you have any of the following symptoms, get emergency help immediately. The sooner you get help, the more doctors can do to prevent further or permanent damage.

- Sudden weakness or numbness of the face, arm or leg on one side of the body
- Sudden dimness or loss of vision, particularly in one eye
- Loss of speech, trouble talking or understanding what others are saying
- Sudden severe headache with no known cause
- Unexplained dizziness, unstable walking or falling, especially along with any of the other symptoms