

Stroke

Definition

What is a Stroke? A stroke occurs when a blood vessel, which is carrying oxygen and nutrients to the brain, bursts or is blocked by a clot, causing your brain cells to become damaged or destroyed.

A [stroke](#) is a medical emergency. Therefore, recognising the symptoms and accessing treatment immediately can be crucial.

Until recently many doctors believed little or nothing could be done following a stroke. We now know strokes are very treatable and, if the right actions are taken quickly, the patient may not have any long term effects.

One in five people will have a stroke at some time in their life. Most are over 65, but stroke can strike even young people and children.

Types of Stroke

- TIA is also known as a **mini-stroke** and happens when the brain's blood supply is briefly interrupted, usually for a few minutes but occasionally as long as 24 hours. A mini-stroke may cause a brief loss of vision, loss of speech, or weakness in one side of the body. People will usually recover within a few minutes and won't have any obvious disability.

TIA sufferers should seek urgent medical attention for assessment. Without assessment and treatment, about one in four people who have had a TIA will go on to have a full-blown stroke within a few years.

- CVA is also known as a **massive stroke**. This is a serious emergency and the patient will need urgent medical attention.

Symptoms include;

- Numbness, weakness, or paralysis on one side of the body
- Slurred speech, difficulty thinking of words or understanding others
- Confusion
- Sudden blurred vision or sight loss
- Being unsteady on your feet
- Severe headache

The right half of the brain controls the left side of the body and vice versa. For example, weakness or paralysis in the left arm may result from a stroke in the right side of the brain.

For most people, the left side of the brain controls language (talking, reading, writing, understanding). The right side controls perceptual skills (making sense of what you see, hear, touch) and spatial skills.

Causes

Clots form in arteries that already have been hardened. Hardening of the arteries is fatty material that builds up along the inner lining of the arteries so that they become narrower and the blood flowing through them becomes more likely to clot. Lifestyle risk factors include [high cholesterol](#), [smoking](#), [high blood pressure](#), [diabetes](#), [obesity](#) and [physical inactivity](#).

Up to 20% of strokes are caused by a bleed into the brain. This is called a haemorrhage and causes the more serious kind of stroke. Even though many people believe it to be a factor, stress is not a cause of stroke.

Prevention

Every year, more than 10,000 people in Ireland have a stroke. Stroke is the third biggest cause of death in this country.

Some people are at greater risk for reasons beyond their control such as age and family history. Also, statistics show that people from Asian and African communities are more likely to have a stroke.

Diagnosis

A stroke is a medical emergency so recognising the symptoms and accessing treatment immediately can be crucial.

When Stroke Strikes, Act F.A.S.T.

A simple test can help you recognise if someone has had a stroke:

Facial weakness – can the person smile? Has their mouth or eye drooped?

Arm weakness – can the person raise both arms?

Speech problems – can the person speak clearly and understand what you say?

Time – call 999 for an ambulance if you spot any one of these signs.

Every minute counts. Don't wait for the symptoms to go away.

It is also recommended, especially if you live in a rural area, to know your Eircode so that emergency services can find your home or workplace instantly.

Treatment

Emergency treatment for stroke depends on whether the stroke is caused by a blockage in your artery (clot) or bleeding into your brain (haemorrhage).

Some strokes can be treated by a clot-busting drug aimed to dissolve the blood clot with powerful blood thinners.

This treatment is only effective if received within 4.5 hours of your stroke starting. This is why it is so important to get to hospital immediately because the more time passes the less effective it is. You may also be given aspirin to stop clots forming.

With haemorrhagic stroke the emergency treatment focuses on controlling the bleeding and reducing the pressure it is causing in your brain. Surgery also may be needed to remove the blood and repair the blood vessel.

What common disabilities can stroke cause?

Stroke affects people differently. The effects vary widely depending on what part of your brain has been injured. The following effects are common:

- About 80% of people who survive a stroke will suffer paralysis on one side of the body.
- Your balance. This may also be affected making you likely to fall or to lean sideways in bed, or on a chair.
- Loss of sensation on one side of the body
- Swallowing. Swallowing difficulties affect about 50% of people who have a stroke. Liquids are more difficult to swallow than solid food.
- Difficulties in communicating. There are two major communication problems after stroke:
 1. Not being able to understand the spoken word.
 2. Not being able to express words.
 3. They may lose their ability to speak but still understand what is said to them. You should not assume that they cannot understand you though.
 4. Some people think everyone else is speaking a foreign language. After a stroke they may be able to speak, but what they say may not always make sense. Your reading and writing abilities can also be affected.
 5. Loss of intellectual or thinking ability. You may have problems with attention, concentration, working out problems and grasping new information. Memory problems usually relate to day-to-day events rather than long-term memories.

- Loss of half their field of vision. If they have weakness of the left side, they may find it difficult to see on that side. Often people may be surprised to keep bumping into furniture and door frames.
- Emotional changes. Ups and downs can be caused either by the distress from having a stroke, or changes that have happened in the brain.
- Mood swings, caused by changes in the brain, are often experienced. Depression, anger, anxiety, sadness and loss of confidence are all common. They may find it hard to control their emotions and may laugh or cry for no apparent reason.

The Recovery Process

Following the initial emergency treatment, subsequent care focuses on regaining your strength, recovering as much function as possible and returning to independent living.

They may also have difficulties with swallowing, balancing and vision.

For some people the effects are mild and last a short time. Other strokes may cause more severe or lasting disability.

Rehabilitation

Rehabilitation should start soon after you are admitted to hospital.

The rehabilitation team includes Speech and Language Therapists, Occupational Therapists, Physiotherapists, Dieticians, Nurses, Psychologists and Social Workers. They work together to help them make the best recovery.

Recovery is different for each person. Some people may recover and have only a slight disability. Other people may have more serious disabilities. In general, most recovery is made in the first year, but progress can happen after this.

Unfortunately, some people will not recover from a stroke. People who are dying as a result of a stroke should be given end-of-life care.

Resources

There are also many Stroke Support Groups all over Ireland for stroke sufferers and their family members, where you can talk to other people who have suffered a stroke and share advice.

More information can also be found on the [Irish Heart Foundation](#) website: