



STROKE: LEARN THE WARNING SIGNS AND PROTECT YOURSELF

Strokes are the leading cause of major disability in the U.S. and the second leading cause of death worldwide.



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CHARGE
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HEALTH**

With all the emphasis placed on heart disease and cancer as the two leading causes of death in America, people often forget what ranks as third. The answer is stroke, and it can have debilitating effects even if you survive.

On average, someone has a stroke in the U.S. every 45 seconds, which equals 700,000 strokes a year. Of these, about 500,000 are first-time strokes. Strokes are so pervasive that they are the leading cause of major disability in the U.S. and the second leading cause of death worldwide.

A stroke occurs when blood flow to parts of the brain is restricted or impaired, killing off brain cells. Those cells can never regenerate, which means the damage is permanent. This can cause sufferers to lose control of their speech, movement or memory, depending on where the damage is in the brain.

Strokes don't affect just men, either. Statistics show women suffer about 40,000 more stroke deaths a year than men. And the condition disproportionately affects minorities by a wide margin.

The Office of Minority Health reports African-American adults are twice as likely to have a stroke compared to their White adult counterparts. African-American men are 60 percent more likely to die from a stroke than White men, according to the same report.

Studies show African Americans as a whole are more likely to die of a stroke at an earlier age compared to other races. Almost half the deaths occur before age 75, compared to Asians at 45 percent and 25 percent for Whites.

There is conflicting opinion on why there is such a high prevalence of stroke among African Americans, but certain risk factors can increase chances of suffering a stroke. They include smoking, high blood pressure, heart disease, high cholesterol, obesity, Type 2 diabetes and Sickle Cell Anemia. The last two conditions have a disproportionately high occurrence rate among African Americans, as well.

John Ray, Jr., M.D., is a family practice specialist with Pinnacle Family Care and often sees stroke patients at his Fayetteville practice. He says the best way to deal with stroke is not to have one.

"I can't place enough emphasis on prevention," Dr. Ray says, "because by the time a stroke sufferer

reaches us, they've already been to the hospital. The only thing left by then is active physical therapy."

Dr. Ray says that is why he preaches religiously to patients about lowering blood pressure and cholesterol, healthy diet and regular exercise, and keeping any pre-existing conditions in check through regular checkups. He goes on to say that having a primary care physician is vital.



John Ray, Jr., M.D.
Family Practice

"All adults should speak to their doctors about diet and controlling their blood pressure," Dr. Ray says. "You want to actively prevent this before it happens."

There are two basic types of stroke. The first is ischemic stroke caused by blood clots or other particles in the blood vessels leading to the brain; the second is hemorrhagic stroke caused by internal bleeding in the brain. Each type of stroke affects people differently depending on where the stroke occurs in the brain and for how long.

Paralysis on one side of the body is the most well-known side effect, but there are others.

Stroke survivors may cry easily or have severe mood swings for no apparent reason. This is called emotional lability and can include uncontrollable laughing or feelings of depression. Survivors may also lose arm or leg mobility and have vision or speech problems, swallowing problems and impaired mental comprehension.

Knowing the warning signs of stroke can lessen its long-term severity and possibly save your life. Signs include sudden numbness or weakness in the face; sudden confusion, trouble speaking or understanding; loss of vision; sudden coordination or walking problems; and sudden, severe headaches.

If you experience one or more symptoms, don't ignore the signs even if they go away. Call 911 immediately because stroke is a medical emergency. Allowing a medical professional to properly diagnose your stroke increases your chance of survival.

Modern technology has made it easier for medical professionals to diagnose a stroke, through high-tech equipment like Computerized Tomography (CT) and Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) scanners. These devices quickly generate digital X-rays of areas deep inside the brain to pinpoint where a stroke might have occurred.

If a diagnosis is confirmed, surgery, drugs, hospital care and rehabilitation are all treatment options. The best treatment, however, is always prevention.