

What is a Stroke?

A stroke is a disruption in the blood supply to the brain. Most strokes are caused by blockages (usually blood clots) disrupting the brain's blood supply. These are called ischaemic strokes. Some strokes are caused by bleeds. These are called haemorrhagic strokes.

The brain depends on a supply of blood for the oxygen and nutrients it requires to function properly. When the blood supply is disrupted, brain cells are starved of oxygen and nutrients. This causes damage to the brain tissue.

If you suspect someone is having a stroke call 999. Stroke is the leading cause of adult disability in the UK. Strokes can affect people of any age but are more common in older people.

Some people have a temporary blockage in the blood supply to their brain which clears of its own accord, quickly and before lasting damage to the brain is done. This is called a transient ischaemic attack (TIA)

What are the symptoms of stroke?

Each person is affected differently by stroke and individual's symptoms depend on which parts of the brain are affected and for what specific functions these parts of the brain are responsible. The severity of the symptoms depends on how much damage is done to the brain.

The main symptoms of stroke are physical problems in one side of the body (numbness, weakness), drooping in one side of the face, speech problems (slurred speech, muddled words) and visual problems (blurred vision, loss of vision). In more serious cases, the person might lose consciousness. The onset of stroke symptoms is usually sudden. Strokes can occur while people are sleeping. If this happens, people can wake up with the symptoms.

People might also experience longer-term effects such as psychological problems (for example, depression or difficulty controlling emotions), bowel or bladder problems (incontinence) and problems with swallowing. Other symptoms can include pain, dizziness and balance problems, memory problems, a loss of awareness of one side of the body (neglect) and fatigue.

What causes strokes?

Most strokes are caused by damaged arteries (the blood vessels through which blood flows from the heart to the rest of the body). Damage to the arteries carrying blood to the brain can cause strokes in the same way that damaged arteries in the heart can cause heart attacks.

Our arteries tend to harden, narrow and weaken as we get older but people with high blood pressure, smokers, people with high cholesterol and people with heart disease or diabetes (or a family history of heart disease or diabetes) are at an increased risk.

Recovery

Most people tend to make their best recovery in the first few weeks and months after the stroke but people can continue to recover slowly over the months and even years. If you have any physical problems after your stroke, it is likely that you will benefit from physiotherapy. A physiotherapist can help your physical recovery and the recovery of movements such as walking.

If you have any speech problems it is likely that you will benefit from speech and language therapy. A speech and language therapist can help with the recovery of your communications skills. They can also help if you have swallowing problems.

You might also benefit from occupational therapy. An occupational therapist can help you redevelop the skills you need to perform everyday activities at home like washing and cooking. They can also recommend special equipment or adaptations to your home to make life easier.

Around a third of people make a good recovery, around a third are left with some form of disability and around a third die from their stroke.

Information

For more information on the issue, you can use the following link and helpline number:

www.brainandspine.org.uk Tel: 0808 808 1000

A wide range of equality factsheets on a variety of issues can be downloaded from the following link: www.cwu.org/factsheets

Linda Roy

National Equality Officer

Email: lroy@cwu.org

Tel: 0208 971 7238

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