

STROKE

PATIENT/FAMILY INFORMATION SHEET

What is a stroke?

A stroke or cerebrovascular accident (CVA) is a life-threatening event in which the brain's vital supply of oxygen is disrupted. It has been called a "brain attack." A stroke is a type of brain injury. The symptoms depend on the part of the brain that is affected. A stroke can affect the senses, speech, mobility, behavior, thought patterns, and memory. It may also result in paralysis, coma, and death.

What causes a stroke?

A stroke occurs when a clot blocks blood vessels to the brain or the vessels become too narrow for blood to pass through. A stroke can also occur when a blood vessel bursts and blood leaks into the brain causing damage. Brain tissue that is deprived of oxygen dies within minutes. As a result, the part of the body controlled by those brain cells cannot function properly. High blood pressure and atherosclerosis, (the buildup of fat in the arteries) increases the risk of a stroke.

What are the risk factors for a stroke?

Risk factors you can change, treat or control

- Chronic illness: e.g. Carotid artery disease, diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart disease
- *Excessive alcohol use
- High blood cholesterol
- Illicit drug use
- Obesity
- Sedentary lifestyle
- Smoking
- Use of oral contraceptives

Risk factors you can not change

- Gender
- Increasing age
- Prior stroke
- Race

What are the warning signs of a stroke?

- Sudden numbness, weakness, or paralysis of the face, arm or leg
- Sudden blurred or decreased vision in one or both eyes
- Sudden difficulty speaking or understanding
- Sudden dizziness, loss of balance, or an unexplained fall
- Sudden headache (usually severe) or unexplained change in the pattern of headaches

Call 911 immediately when signs of a stroke begin to occur. Treat it as a medical emergency. Damage to brain tissue can be prevented if treatment is started as soon as possible. Today, one of the clot-busting drugs commonly used to treat heart attack has been approved for treating stroke in certain cases. It has the potential to save lives and reduce disability from stroke, but it must be administered soon after symptoms begin. This is why it is vitally important to call 911 immediately at the first sign of a stroke.

What can I do to prevent a stroke?

- *Avoid excess alcohol
- Exercise regularly
- Do not smoke (especially if taking oral contraceptives)
- Eat a diet low in processed foods, salt and fat
- Take medications as prescribed
- Take off extra weight
- Get regular medical checkups
- Control chronic illness

What is the course of a stroke?

A stroke usually results in varying degrees of loss of sensation or function in the body. One area of the body may be affected more than another area. A person's right leg and arm may be paralyzed and the left side can be normal. This is because the damage of a stroke is usually limited to one side of the brain. Each half of the brain controls functions on the opposite side of the body. Some people may be unable to speak after a stroke, but their other body functions may be minimally affected. The degree of recovery from a stroke varies greatly. The extent of long-term damage depends on where the stroke occurs, how large it is and how quickly care is provided.

What are Transient Ischemic Attacks?

Transient Ischemic Attacks (TIAs) are often called "ministrokes" and are warning signs that may occur days, weeks, or even months before a major stroke. They occur when there is a temporary interruption in the blood supply to the brain. The signs of a TIA are like a stroke, but they usually last only a few minutes. Because they are temporary and the body soon returns to normal, it is easy to ignore them or to believe that the problem has disappeared. A TIA should never be ignored. If you suspect that you have had a TIA call your physician immediately.

Where can I get more information?

Organization	Phone	Internet Address
Greenwich Health at Greenwich Hospital (Free Blood Pressure Screening Available)	203.863.4444	http://www.greenhosp.chime.org/medicalservices_cardiology-education.asp
Greenwich Hospital Medical Fitness Program	203.863.3751	http://www.greenhosp.org/medicalservices_cardiology-patientcare.asp#rehab
Greenwich Hospital Smoking Cessation Program	203.863.3570	NA
American Heart Association	800.242.8721	www.americanheart.org

*Avoid drinking more than one to two drinks per day for men and one drink per day for women. A **drink** is one 12 oz. beer, 4 oz. of wine, 1.5 oz. of 80-proof spirits, or 1 oz. of 100-proof spirits.

For more Patient Fact Sheets, see the Greenwich Hospital web site at www.greenhosp.org and click on Patients & Visitors, then Patient Education Rev. 7/04