Stroke First Aid – how to recognise a Stroke

Stroke First Aid – strokes can happen to anyone at any age, what causes them, how to spot them and how to react.

Eating a healthy diet, taking regular exercise, drinking alcohol in moderation and not smoking will dramatically reduce your risk of having a stroke. This article on stroke first aid explains what a stroke is, how to recognise one, and identifies the main risk factors so you can take steps now to avoid this happening you.

Each year, approximately 10,000 Irish people have a stroke and around 2,000 die. It is the third largest cause of death, behind heart disease and cancer. An approximated 30,000 people are living with disabilities as a outcome of a stroke. This makes stroke the third largest cause of death in Ireland and the leading cause of acquired disability. ***(irishheart.ie)***

What is a Stroke?

A stroke is a life-threatening medical condition that occurs when the blood supply to part of the brain is cut off. Some people are able to make a full recovery following a stroke, others experience life-changing brain damage and sadly for some people a stroke is results in death. A stroke can happen to anyone of any age, even babies, although they are more common in older people. Strokes are a medical emergency and prompt treatment is crucial because the sooner a person receives treatment for the stroke, the less damage is likely to occur.

There are two main types of stoke; a blockage or a bleed:

- **Ischaemic** – is caused by a blood clot blocking blood flow in the brain; these are the most common and account for over 80% of all cases. These blood clots can be caused by a build-up of fatty deposits and plaque in the arteries. If these plaques break away, or if they slow the blood flow to the extent that it forms a clot, they can block a blood vessel supplying the brain and cause a stroke.

- **Haemorrhagic**– happens when a weakened blood vessel supplying the brain bursts.

Trans-Ischaemic Attacks

A Trans-Ischaemic Attack (TIA) also known as a mini-stroke. These are the same as a stroke, except that the symptoms last for a short amount of time, from just a few minutes to up to 24 hours. TIA's are warning signs that someone is at high risk of having a stroke and should be treated as a medical emergency. There is about a one in 10 chance that those who have a TIA will experience a full stroke during the four weeks following the TIA *(hse.ie)*. Early diagnosis and treatment can prevent a full stroke so do not wait to see if symptoms get better because

Stroke First Aid – recognising the signs and symptoms

The signs and symptoms of a stroke vary from person to person but they normally begin unexpectedly. Different parts of the brain control different areas of the body, therefore symptoms will depend on which part of the brain is affected and the level of damage done.

The main stroke symptoms can be remembered with the acronym FAST (Face-Arms-Speech-Time):

- **Face**: the persons face, mouth or eye may be dropped on one side, they may not be able to smile
- **Arms**: they may not be able to lift one or both arms and keep them there because of arm numbness or weakness
- **Speech**: the persons speech may be slurred or distorted, or they may

not be able to talk at all even though they appear to be alert
- **Time**: it is time to dial 999 immediately if you see any of these signs or symptoms

Other possible symptoms can include:

- sudden weakness or numbness on one side of the body, including legs, hands or feet
- difficulty finding words or speaking in clear sentences and difficulty understanding what others are saying
- blurred vision or loss of sight in one or both eyes
- memory loss or confusion
- dizziness or a sudden fall
- a sudden or severe headache
- difficulty swallowing
- difficulty understanding what others are saying

Rapid response is vital with Stroke First Aid

The faster someone having a stroke gets treatment, the less damage is likely to occur. If someone is showing the signs of a stroke, phone for an ambulance straight away as time is critical. If the stroke is caused by a blood clot and they are able to receive acute treatments such as thrombosis within four and a half hours, the symptoms of the stroke can be dramatically reduced. Thrombosis is the breakdown of blood clots formed in blood vessels using medication. It can only be given within 4.5-hours of onset of stroke symptoms.

According to the Irish National Audit of Stroke report 2019, 51 per cent of patients arrived at hospital more than three hours after the onset of stroke symptoms, with 20 per cent arriving between four and a half and 12 hours, with 21 per cent arriving at hospital more than 12 hours post stroke. According to the Irish National Audit of Stroke report 2019, 51 per cent of patients arrived at hospital more than three hours after the onset of stroke symptoms, with 20 per cent arriving between four and a half and 12 hours, with 21 per cent arriving at hospital more than 12 hours post stroke. This means that almost one in two stroke patients arrived at hospital more than three hours from the time they first experienced stroke

symptoms which means that they were less likely to receive vital treatment.

Stroke First Aid Treatment

Treatment of a stroke will be determined by what caused the stroke and which part of the brain was affected. The type of stroke the person had will also be a major factor, along with factors such as health, age and medical history.

Strokes can usually be successfully treated using a combination of medicines and, in some cases, surgery. However, many people will need a lengthy period of rehabilitation after a stroke and not all will make a full recovery.

Main risk factors for stroke

Your age

The risk of suffering from a stroke increases as you get older. This is due to the natural narrowing and hardening of our arteries as we age. People who are over 65 years of age account for 75% of strokes in Ireland.

Medical conditions

Certain medical conditions can increase your risk of stroke including; diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol and atrial fibrillation. An important way to reduce your risk of stroke is to find out if you have any of these conditions and work with your doctor to manage them.

Lifestyle factors

Lifestyle choices have a major impact on the risk of stroke. Smoking, drinking too much alcohol, consuming too much salt, being overweight and eating unhealthy foods, damages blood vessels, increases blood pressure and dramatically raises the risk of stroke. Conversely, changing lifestyle and making healthy choices can substantially reduce the likelihood of someone experiencing a stroke.

Regular exercise will make your heart and blood circulatory system more efficient. It will also lower your cholesterol level and keep your blood pressure at a healthy

level. For most people, at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise every week is recommended.

Smoking doubles your risk of having a stroke. This is because it narrows your arteries and makes your blood more likely to clot. If you stop smoking, you can reduce your risk of having a stroke by up to half. For advice on quitting smoking go to ***www.quit.ie*****.**

Excessive alcohol consumption can lead to high blood pressure and an irregular heartbeat. Both are major risk factors for stroke. Alcoholic drinks are also high in calories causing weight gain. Heavy drinking multiple the risk of stroke by more than 3 times ***(hse.ie)*****.**

Some ethnicities are at higher risk of stroke

People with African, Caribbean or South Asian backgrounds have a higher predisposition to diabetes, atherosclerosis and high blood pressure. These underlying medical conditions greatly increase the risk of stroke.

Pregnant women

Health conditions that can affect pregnant women such as pre-eclampsia and gestational diabetes can raise your risk of a stroke. However, routine ante-natal checks should pick up and treat these issues if they occur. Furthermore, if you have any health concerns when pregnant, always speak to your midwife or GP immediately.

Diet

A poor diet is a major risk factor for a stroke. High-fat foods can lead to the build-up of fatty plaques in your arteries and being overweight can lead to high blood pressure.

A low-fat (avoid foods containing saturated fats), high-fibre diet is recommended, including plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables (five portions a day) and whole grains. You should limit the amount of salt that you eat to no more than 6g (about

one teaspoonful) a day because too much salt will increase your blood pressure.

About Us

Donegal Safety Services provide a number of first aid training courses, if you have any questions at all regarding any of our courses we would be delighted to hear from you. You can contact us by visiting our contact us page or by emailing us directly on info@donegalsafetyservices.ie

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Hope you enjoyed this article on Stroke First Aid. You may also like to read or article on ***'What you should do if you are having a heart attack and you are alone'.***