

Stroke Information, Risk Factors and Treatment Options

by Jeannie Pittenger, RN, Stroke Program Coordinator, Sacred Heart Hospital
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Strokes... the first leading cause of disability, the fourth leading cause of death, and you are never too young to have one or too old to prevent one... according to Jeannie Pittenger, RN Stroke Program Coordinator at Sacred Heart Hospital. There are 795,000 new strokes per year in America, and while the risk factor is higher for women, African Americans, and older citizens, anyone can have a stroke.

What is a stroke... quite simply brain tissue death caused by lack of oxygen to the brain, either from the blockage of blood flow or from a ruptured blood vessel. Common symptoms include sudden onset of weakness on one side of the body, speech or vision difficulties, coordination problems, dizziness, confusion, or a severe headache.

As with many medical events, *time matters*... the earlier a stroke is treated the better the outcome. There are windows of time from 3 to 8 hours, depending on the nature of the stroke or treatment, during which the right diagnosis and treatment can reduce or eliminate the damage that a stroke can cause. As late as the 1970's very little could be done for stroke victims, other than to provide rehab services, but since then, unbelievable advances have been made in medical knowledge and technology.

The most common risk factors for strokes include high blood pressure, obesity, smoking, diabetes, and high cholesterol. Most, if not all, of these risk factors can be controlled or managed. But, unfortunately, the reality is that we as a society are getting worse, not better, at stroke prevention.

In summary:

- Monitoring risk factors is the key to prevention.
 - There is hope if a stroke occurs.
 - You are never too young to have a stroke and never too old to try to prevent one.
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