

Stroke - signs and symptoms

Stroke is often referred to by doctors as a cerebrovascular accident, but stroke is rarely an 'accident'. The underlying conditions of a stroke (or cerebrovascular disease) are usually present for years before a stroke occurs, although the symptoms of a stroke may occur suddenly. Transient ischaemic attacks (TIAs) are an important warning sign that a stroke may occur in the future.

There are sometimes quite specific warning signs of an impending stroke. By recognising the warning signs and taking action, you may be able to prevent a stroke or reduce its severity. It is important to be able to recognise the warning signs in order to get medical help as quickly as possible.

Symptoms of a stroke

Symptoms of a stroke can include:

- A numb or weak feeling in the face, arm or leg
- Trouble speaking or understanding
- Unexplained dizziness
- Blurred or poor vision in one or both eyes
- Loss of balance or an unexplained fall
- Difficulty swallowing
- Headache (usually severe or of abrupt onset) or unexplained change in the pattern of headaches
- Confusion

The **FAST test** is an easy way to recognise and remember the most common signs of stroke or a TIA. Using the **FAST** test involves asking three simple questions. If the person has a problem with any of these functions, dial triple zero (000) for an ambulance immediately.

FAST stands for:

- **F**acial weakness – can the person smile; have their mouth or eyes drooped on one side?
- **A**rm weakness – can the person raise both arms?
- **S**peech difficulty – can the person speak clearly and understand what you say?
- **T**ime to act – act **FAST** and **call 000 immediately**.

If you suddenly experience any of these symptoms, get to a hospital immediately. Remember, stroke is a life-threatening emergency.

Symptoms of a stroke occur in a variety of ways

The warning signs or symptoms of stroke may occur alone or in combination. They may last a few seconds or hours, and may or may not disappear. The severity of the symptoms depends on the area of the brain affected and the cause.

Transient ischaemic attacks

Transient ischaemic attacks (TIAs) are caused by a temporary cut in blood supply to the brain, due to the partial blockage of an artery by a blood clot or debris. TIAs have the same symptoms as a stroke, but they are temporary and do not usually cause long-term brain damage. A TIA can appear hours, days, weeks or months before a full stroke but is more common within days or a few weeks. Just like full strokes, TIAs need emergency treatment and should not be ignored.

A TIA, or mini-stroke, is a warning of an impending stroke. A person who has had a TIA is at greater risk of having a stroke or heart attack. Early identification of symptoms and early management from your doctor greatly reduces the chances of a major stroke.
A TIA is:

- **Transient** – symptoms last for less than 24 hours.
- **Ischaemic** – failure of blood flow to part of the brain or eye.
- **Attack** – sudden onset of symptoms, which vary from person to person depending on which part of the brain or eye is starved of blood.

Where to get help

- In an emergency, call triple zero (000)
- Get to the emergency department of your nearest hospital immediately
- Your doctor
- National Stroke Foundation StrokeLine Tel. 1800 787 653

Things to remember

- The symptoms of stroke can occur suddenly.
- Transient ischaemic attacks (TIAs) are an important warning sign that a stroke may occur in the future.
- Remember the FAST test and act FAST if you experience any of the signs of stroke.
- Early identification of symptoms and early diagnosis and management from your doctor greatly reduces the chances of a major stroke.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

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