

Stroke is a brain attack

A stroke interrupts blood flow to an area of the brain. A blood clot may block a blood vessel or artery, or a blood vessel wall might break. Brain cells in the immediate area are killed because they are deprived of oxygen. This dead area is known as an infarct. Without prompt treatment, the area of brain cells surrounding the infarct will also die.

In 2010, Australians suffered around 60,000 new and recurrent strokes. It is Australia's second biggest killer after heart disease.

Effects can vary

Both the size and location of the stroke influence which brain functions are lost or affected. Someone who has a small stroke may experience only minor effects, but someone who has a larger stroke may be left paralysed on one side or in a coma. Some people recover completely from less serious strokes, while others die from more severe strokes. People with severe stroke can also make a good recovery.

Transient ischaemic attack

A transient ischaemic attack (TIA) is often called a 'mini stroke' and provides a powerful warning that a severe stroke may follow. The symptoms are identical to those of a full stroke, but disappear in a few minutes and last no longer than 24 hours. A TIA can appear hours, days, weeks or months before a full stroke, but is more common in the days or weeks leading up to the stroke. Just like full strokes, TIAs need emergency treatment and should not be ignored.

Warning signs

Stroke is a medical emergency. The longer a stroke remains untreated, the greater the degree of stroke-related brain damage. The signs of both stroke and TIA could be one or a combination of the following:

- Sudden blurred or decreased vision in one or both eyes
- Numbness, weakness or paralysis of the face, arm or leg
- Difficulty speaking or understanding
- Dizziness, loss of balance
- Difficulty swallowing
- Severe headache.

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

- **F**acial weakness – can the person smile; have their mouth or eyes drooped?
- **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**.

Reduce your risk of stroke

Stroke risk is influenced by a number of factors. Some of these factors, such as age, gender and family history, cannot be controlled. However, there are a number of risk factors that you **can** control to reduce your chance of having a stroke.

Lifestyle factors that increase your risk of stroke include:

- High blood pressure
- Cigarette smoking
- Diabetes
- High cholesterol level
- Excessive amounts of alcohol
- Being overweight or obese
- A diet high in salt and fat
- Lack of exercise.

Irregular heartbeat can cause stroke

Atrial fibrillation (AF) is a risk factor for stroke. AF is the term given to a particular type of irregular heartbeat where the left atrium of the heart beats rapidly and unpredictably. In a healthy heart, all four chambers beat in unison at somewhere between 60 and 100 times per minute. The left atrium of someone with AF can beat irregularly at over 400 times per minute. Untreated, AF can increase the risk of stroke and lead to potential heart failure.

The symptoms of AF include:

- Pounding or fluttering heartbeat, known as heart palpitations
- Dizziness, faintness or light-headedness
- Tiredness
- Shortness of breath
- Chest pain.

Emergency treatment is crucial

If you experience any symptoms, dial triple zero (000), even if the symptoms don't last for long. If you have suffered a stroke, emergency medical treatment could save your life and reduce the risk of permanent damage.

Where to get help

If you experience symptoms of a stroke:

- Dial triple zero (000) to call an ambulance, or
- Get to your nearest hospital emergency department

For more information on stroke:

- Your doctor
- National Stroke Foundation StrokeLine Tel. 1800 787 653

Things to remember

- Stroke is a medical emergency.
- A transient ischaemic attack (TIA) can be a warning sign that a large stroke could happen.
- You can reduce your risk of stroke by making some healthy lifestyle changes.

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

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