Women and stroke

Summary

- More women than men die of stroke.
- Stroke is the second biggest killer of Australian women and kills more women than breast cancer.
- Hormonal factors during pregnancy and while taking some types of the oral contraceptive pill can increase the risk of stroke in some women.
- An easy way to recognise the most common signs of stroke and the first aid needed is to remember the term ‘FAST’ – look for Facial weakness, Arm weakness, Speech problems and remember Time is critical, so act quickly.
- A stroke is a life-threatening medical emergency, so always call triple zero (000) and tell the operator you think someone is having a stroke.

Stroke happens when brain cells are starved of oxygen and nutrients because the blood supply to the brain is interrupted. The interruption can occur either because a blood vessel in the brain has burst (haemorrhagic stroke) or because the blood vessel is blocked, typically by a blood clot (ischaemic stroke). The majority of strokes are ischaemic strokes.

Although both men and women have strokes, people are beginning to acknowledge that more women have strokes than men and that women bear more of the long-term burden of stroke. This can partly be explained by women living longer, but there are also other gender-specific factors.

Women are also more likely to be carers for people who have had a stroke and so experience more of the consequences of stroke, including a higher risk of having a stroke themselves. The World Stroke Organization has launched a global World Stroke Campaign 2014–2016 focused on bringing attention to how women are affected by stroke.

Facts about women and stroke

Women carry much of the burden of stroke and the statistics show that:

- Stroke is the second biggest killer of Australian women and kills more women than breast cancer.
- More women than men die of stroke
- Women tend to have strokes when they are older and so the impact is more devastating and they have more disability.
- Three in four carers of people who have had a stroke are women.
- Women who care for people with a stroke are more likely to suffer health problems such as depression and stroke themselves.

Causes of stroke in women

Increased risk of stroke in women is associated with:

- migraines with visual aura such as flashing lights, blind spots, difficulty focusing on things – this is a risk, especially if combined with smoking and the oral contraceptive pill
- smoking
- obesity
- pregnancy
- some types of oral contraceptive pill
Women have a higher lifetime risk of stroke and also have a number of gender-specific risk factors. Although stroke is uncommon in pregnancy, it is a risk factor, especially if the woman has pre-eclampsia or high blood pressure. The risk is increased in the third trimester and for three months after giving birth.

Hormonal factors during pregnancy and while taking some types of the oral contraceptive pill can increase the likelihood of blood clotting and so increase the risk of stroke in some women.

Women are more likely to have a burst blood vessel (cerebral aneurism), and women are more likely to have a specific type of bleeding in the brain (subarachnoid haemorrhage).

Reducing the risk of stroke in women
Making lifestyle changes can largely prevent stroke in woman. These include giving up smoking, maintaining a healthy weight and exercising. However, there needs to more education about specific risk factors that affect women. You should speak with your doctor about stroke in women for more advice.

First aid for a stroke emergency
A stroke is a life-threatening medical emergency and it is essential the person gets to hospital quickly for early treatment. In an emergency, always call triple zero (000) and tell the operator you think someone is having a stroke.

An easy way to recognise the most common signs of stroke and to know what to do is to remember the term ‘FAST’.

FAST stands for:
- facial weakness – check the person’s face to see if their mouth has drooped
- arm weakness – ask the person if they can lift both arms
- speech difficulties – check if their speech is slurred and they understand you
- time – is critical. If you see any of these signs, call triple zero (000) straight away.

If you suddenly experience any of these symptoms, get to a hospital immediately.

Where to get help
- Your doctor
- In an emergency, always call triple zero (000)
- Emergency department of your nearest hospital
- NURSE-ON-CALL Tel. 1300 60 60 24 – for expert health information and advice (24 hours, 7 days)
- St John Ambulance Australia (Victoria) Tel. 1300 360 455
- StrokeLine Tel. 1800 787 653 – for information on stroke treatment, prevention and recovery
- enableme - The Stroke Foundation - Get the information, tips & techniques to equip you in your stroke recovery.