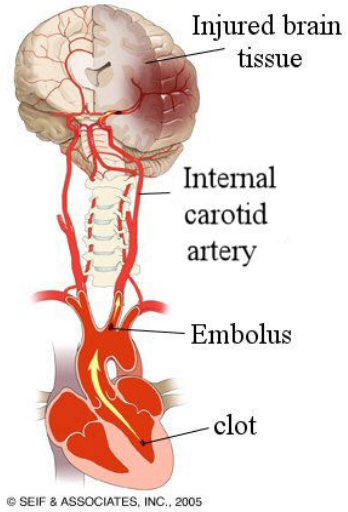
# Stroke (Cerebrovascular Accident)

A stroke is the sudden death of brain tissue. It is a medical emergency. A stroke can cause permanent loss of brain function. If the symptoms of a stroke end without complications in 24 hours, it is diagnosed as a transient ischemic attack (TIA). If the symptoms are not resolved within 24 hours, it is defined as a stroke.




## CAUSES

A stroke is caused by a decrease of oxygen supply to an area of your brain. It is usually the result of a small blood clot or the arteries hardening. A stroke can also be caused by blocked or damaged carotid arteries. Bleeding in the brain can cause, or accompany, a stroke.

## SYMPTOMS

These symptoms usually develop suddenly (or may be newly present upon awakening from sleep):

- Loss of vision.
- Double vision.
- Confusion.
- Numbness or weakness on one side of the face or body.
- Inability to speak (*aphasia*).

## DIAGNOSIS

Your caregiver can often determine the presence or absence of a stroke based on your symptoms, history, and examination. A CT scan of the brain is usually performed to confirm the stroke, to look for causes, and to determine the severity. Other tests may be done to find the cause of the stroke. These tests include:

- An EKG and heart monitoring.
- An ultrasound evaluation of the heart (*echocardiogram*).
- An ultrasound evaluation of your carotid arteries.
- Blood oxygen level monitoring.
- Blood tests.

## PREVENTION

The risk of a stroke can be decreased by appropriately treating high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes, and by quitting smoking.

## RISK FACTORS

- High blood pressure (*hypertension*).
- High cholesterol.
- Diabetes.
- An abnormal heart rhythm (*atrial fibrillation*).
- Being over age 40.
- Family history of stroke or heart attack.
- Personal history of blood clots.
- Smoking.
- Use of illegal drugs (especially cocaine and methamphetamine).
- Taking oral contraceptives (especially in combination with smoking).

## TREATMENT

**TIME IS OF THE ESSENCE!** Medicines to dissolve a blood clot can only be used within 4 1/2 hours of the onset of symptoms. After the 4 1/2 hour window has passed, treatment may include rest, oxygen, intravenous (IV) fluids, and medicines to thin the blood (to prevent another stroke). Treatment of stroke depends on the duration, severity, and cause of your symptoms. Medicines and diet may be used to address diabetes, high blood pressure, and other risk factors. Physical, speech, and occupational therapists will assess you and work to

improve any functions impaired by the stroke. Measures will be taken to prevent short-term and long-term complications, including infection from breathing foreign material into the lungs (*aspiration pneumonia*), blood clots in the legs, bedsores, and falls.

## HOME CARE INSTRUCTIONS

- **Medicines:** Blood thinners may be used to prevent another stroke. Blood thinners need to be used exactly as instructed. Medicines may also be used to control risk factors for a stroke. Be sure you understand all your medicine instructions.
- **Physical, occupational, and speech therapy:** Ongoing therapy is often necessary to maximize your recovery after a stroke. If you have been advised to use a walker or a cane, use it at all times. Be sure to keep your therapy appointments.
- **Diet:** Certain diets may be prescribed to address high blood pressure, high cholesterol, or diabetes. Foods may need to be a special consistency (soft or pureed), or small bites may need to be taken in order to avoid aspirating or choking.
- **Home safety:** A safe home environment is important to reduce the risk of falls. Your caregiver may arrange for specialists to evaluate your home. Having grab bars in the bedroom and bathroom is often important. Your caregiver may arrange for special equipment to be used at home, such as raised toilets and a seat for the shower.
- Follow all instructions for follow-up with your caregiver. This is VERY important. This includes any referrals, physical therapy, and rehabilitation. Proper treatment also prevents another stroke from occurring.

## SEEK IMMEDIATE MEDICAL CARE IF:

- You develop any problems with speaking.
- You develop weakness or numbness in any part of the body.
- You feel faint or pass out.
- You develop a severe headache.
- You have problems walking or keeping your balance.
- You have an oral temperature above 102° F (38.9° C), not controlled by medicine.
- You are coughing or have difficulty breathing.
- You have new chest pain, angina, or an irregular heartbeat.

**ANY OF THESE SYMPTOMS MAY REPRESENT A SERIOUS PROBLEM THAT IS AN EMERGENCY. Do not wait to see if the symptoms will go away. Get medical help right away. Call your local emergency services (911 in U.S.). DO NOT drive yourself to the hospital.**

Document Released: 03/14/2011
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