



Strokes

Recognizing the Early Signs



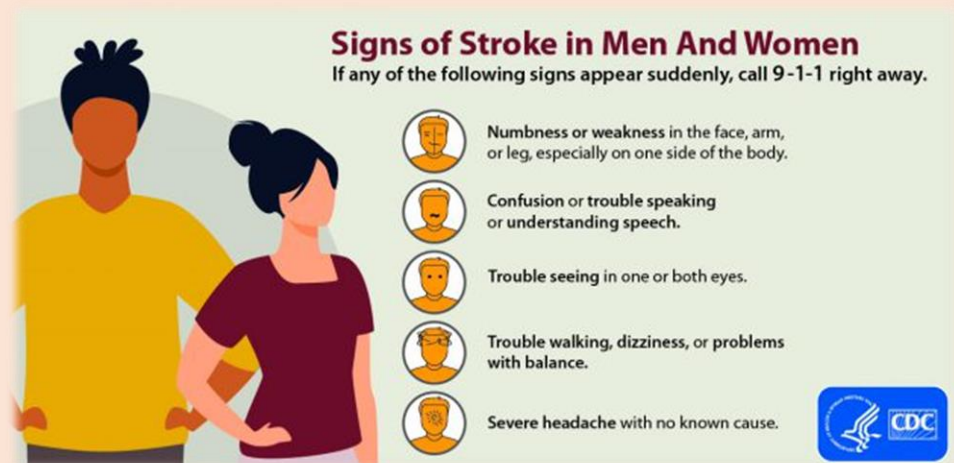
Cardiovascular disease is one of the leading causes of death in the United States, and the CDC estimates that as of 2021, 1 out of 6 deaths due to cardiovascular disease were caused specifically by strokes (CDC, 2023). A stroke, otherwise known as a “brain attack,” occurs when the brain can’t get enough oxygen, either due to a blockage in a blood vessel (the most common stroke, an ischemic stroke), or when a blood vessel is damaged or ruptures (a hemorrhagic stroke). In either case, if the brain is deprived of oxygen, brain cells begin to die off within minutes. This can lead to serious medical problems, such as permanent losses of mobility and function and, as mentioned above, death.

A stroke is a medical emergency, but treatments do exist to save the life of someone having a stroke. However, it’s critical that someone exhibiting signs of a stroke receives emergency care as soon as possible, and every minute counts. Most treatments are only effective within the first 3 hours of symptom onset, so it’s important to act quickly when you or someone you’re with begins to experience the symptoms of a stroke.

In this article, we’ll be talking about the common signs and symptoms of a stroke. We’ll also discuss F.A.S.T., an acronym which outlines what to do when stroke symptoms are suspected. Finally, we’ll briefly touch on transient ischemic strokes (TIAs), and what to do if these are observed.

The Signs and Symptoms

While the likelihood of a stroke increases with age, strokes can technically occur at any age. Below are the most common signs and symptoms of a stroke. If you spot these symptoms in yourself or someone else, be sure to note when the symptoms began! Having an understanding of what time they started could assist emergency responders with providing the best type of care.



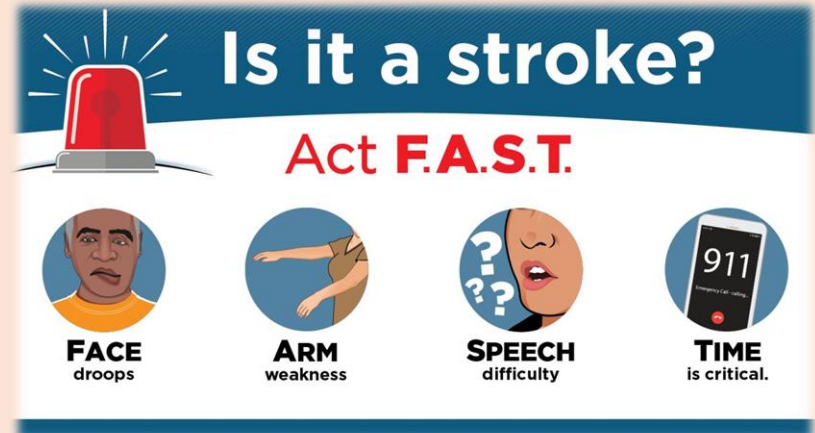
- A sudden numbness, typically on one side of the body. This is best noticed in the face, arm, and/or leg.
- A sudden confusion. This can make speaking or understanding speech difficult for the person.
- A sudden difficulty seeing, either in one or both eyes.
- A sudden difficulty with walking or movement. This can be because of dizziness, a sudden loss of balance, or a sudden loss of coordination.
- A suddenly appearing severe headache without any other apparent cause.

If someone begins experiencing any of these symptoms, call 9-1-1 **immediately**. As said before, the faster medical personnel respond, the higher the chances of survival. The longer a response takes, the higher the likelihood of permanent impairment or even death.

F.A.S.T.

Researchers developed an acronym to help people understand how to spot a stroke, and what to do if stroke symptoms are noticed. For your convenience, we've reproduced this acronym below:

- **F** – Face: Ask the person experiencing symptoms to smile. One side of the face may droop.
- **A** – Arms: Ask the person to try raising both their arms. Note if one of the arms begins to drift downward.
- **S** – Speech: Ask the person to try and say or repeat a simple phrase. Note their speech. Is it slurred? Strange?
- **T** – Time: If you see any of the symptoms above, you should call 9-1-1 **IMMEDIATELY**.



If you or someone with you is experiencing these symptoms, **do not** attempt to drive yourself or them to the hospital. Call emergency services (9-1-1) and wait for paramedics to arrive. Emergency first responders can provide life-saving treatment on route to the hospital and can reach the hospital faster.

Transient Ischemic Strokes (TIAs)

Transient Ischemic Strokes, or TIAs, are sometimes referred to as “mini strokes.” TIAs have some or all the symptoms of a full-on stroke, but unlike a stroke, the symptoms seem to go away on their own in a few minutes. If you or someone with you experiences a TIA, you should still seek immediate medical attention. This is for two primary reasons:

1. There is no way to distinguish a TIA from a full stroke when the symptoms start, so you should act F.A.S.T. just as you would for a stroke. Better safe than sorry!
2. Even if the TIA clears up on its own, this is a warning sign of a serious medical condition. Many people who experience a TIA will usually experience a stroke sometime in the future. The causes of a TIA will not clear up without medical attention, even if the symptoms do. Therefore, someone who has a TIA should seek emergency medical care right away, to help prevent future problems or life-threatening situations.

Remember, spotting a stroke early can help save a life. When you see the signs of a stroke, act F.A.S.T. Follow these steps, and as soon as you possibly can, contact 9-1-1 to get the person emergency medical care. The quicker you act, the higher the likelihood that the person survives and recovers with minimal permanent damage. Don't wait. Act F.A.S.T.!

References

American Stroke Association - stroke.org/en/about-stroke

CDC Stroke Factsheets - cdc.gov/stroke/index.htm

National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute - nhlbi.nih.gov/health/stroke

National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke -
ninds.nih.gov/health-information/disorders/stroke

Mass.gov Stroke Webpage - mass.gov/stroke-prevention-and-control

Mass.gov Factsheet - mass.gov/doc/stroke-factsheet/download