

informedhealthonline.org
INDEPENDENT, OBJECTIVE AND EVIDENCE-BASED

Signs of a stroke

A stroke is an emergency. If you think someone might be having a stroke, it is very important to call the emergency services (in Germany: 112, in the United States: 911) immediately and ask for medical help. Reacting quickly and getting treatment as soon as possible can sometimes stop brain cells from dying. That lowers the risk of serious consequences.

Typical symptoms of a stroke include:

- Sudden weakness, numbness and signs of paralysis: People who are having a stroke can often no longer move their arm, hand and/or leg properly. As well as weakness, some people experience sensations like tingling and numbness. It can sometimes feel like your arm or foot, for example, has gone to sleep. Drooping on one side of the mouth is another typical sign of a stroke. These symptoms usually only affect one side of the body, rarely both sides.
- Speech problems: A lot of people suddenly have difficulties finding the right words during a stroke and speak in broken sentences. Sudden slurring or mumbling can also be signs of a stroke. Sometimes people have problems understanding what others are saying – although they can hear the words, they cannot make sense of them.
- Vision problems: A stroke can affect vision. People are then no longer aware of things to one side of their body, and their field of vision in the left or right eye is limited. Many people suddenly have double vision. If they want to reach for something, such as a cup, they often miss it.
- Dizziness and trouble walking: People may have difficulties keeping their balance. They either feel like everything is spinning around or swaying from side to side.

- Severe headache: A sudden, unusually strong headache can also be a sign of a stroke. Such headaches are caused by acute blood supply problems in the brain or by bleeding in the brain due to a torn or burst blood vessel. Headache may be the only symptom at first, followed by other symptoms such as paralysis and problems with consciousness. Nausea and vomiting are also possible symptoms.

When people have strokes, they are often unable to communicate, or only with difficulty. So it is important that other people who notice that something is wrong clearly describe the symptoms, the circumstances and, if possible, any previous medical conditions. The following information is particularly important:

- When did the symptoms start?
- What was the person doing when the symptoms started? For example, were they doing something strenuous?
- Which stroke symptoms did they have and how did things develop?
- Which medications are they taking at the moment?
- Do they have any known cardiac arrhythmias (heart rhythm problems), particularly atrial fibrillation?
- Have they had similar symptoms or treatment for a stroke in the past?

Remember: a stroke is an emergency. Do not be afraid to call for an ambulance. Waiting to see if the symptoms go away again on their own could waste precious time. People who are having a stroke need to go to hospital to have appropriate tests done and get the right treatment. And no-one will blame you if it turns out to be a “false alarm”.

Author: German Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Health Care (IQWiG)

Glossary

stroke

A stroke (also sometimes called brain attack, or apoplexy, which is Greek for “struck down”) is an acute condition where the brain does not get enough oxygen. It is most commonly caused by a blood clot that has travelled through the bloodstream and is blocking blood vessels in the brain. In rarer cases bleeding in the brain may also result in a stroke. Depending on which part of the brain is affected, there may be paralysis of either all or certain parts of one half of the body, facial nerve impairment, vision problems, trouble balancing and severe problems speaking. A stroke is a medical emergency: the parts of the brain that are affected need to be supplied with oxygen as quickly as possible, to avoid the death of more brain tissue. The risk of having a stroke is greater for older people and people who have hypertension or chronic arteriosclerosis.

atrial fibrillation

Atrial fibrillation is a type of arrhythmia where the heart's atria (the chambers where blood enters the heart) beat very rapidly and irregularly. This is not usually acutely life-threatening, but with time it can increase the risk of having a stroke. This is due to small blood clots that are then more likely to occur in the atria because the normal flow of blood is affected.

Sources

The German Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Health Care (IQWiG)

The German Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Health Care (IQWiG) was established by legislation to provide evaluations of the effectiveness, quality and efficiency of healthcare services. This includes the assessment of medicines as well as the publication of health information for consumers and patients.

Evidence basis of our health information

Our information is based primarily on systematic reviews of the effects of health care. Systematic reviews are necessary to gain an objective picture of health care. In order to do this, a clear question is formulated. Researchers then find all the relevant studies that could answer this question. They then evaluate those studies.

You can find a list of the evidence and other scientific literature on which this information is based at **www.informedhealthonline.org**

Disclaimer

This information was prepared and published by the German Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Health Care (IQWiG). It is based on the evidence and other scientific literature available at the time of publication. The information is intended for the use of patients in Germany. It is not intended to for use to diagnose illnesses and the information is not intended to substitute for medical advice.