Dear Alice,

What is a stroke? What causes it? How should patients who have suffered strokes be treated?

Answer

Dear Reader,

A stroke is sometimes referred to as a "brain attack." During a stroke, brain cells are deprived of oxygen and die. However, like the 80's television show, different folks can have two "different strokes." In the more common ischemic stroke, a blood clot creates a blockage in a blood vessel, cutting off the blood supply to the brain. A hemorrhagic stroke, which happen less frequently, occurs when a blood vessel in the brain ruptures and fills the brain cavity with blood.

No matter the type of stroke, getting medical attention early on is critical to preventing disability. If you or someone you know appears to be having a stroke, call 911 right away. If not treated early, strokes may cause mild to severe complications.

Knowing signs of stroke can help you quickly get help for someone who shows symptoms, which come with no warning. Symptoms of a possible stroke include sudden:

- numbness or weakness in the face, arm, or leg ? especially on one side of the body
- confusion, trouble speaking, or trouble understanding speech
- trouble seeing in one or both eyes
- trouble walking, dizziness, or loss of balance or coordination
- severe headache with no known cause

Adapted from Stroke 101 [2] by the National Stroke Association [3].

While stroke symptoms do occur suddenly, the Mayo Clinic [4] outlines risk factors for stroke, including having a history of previous stroke or transient ischemic attack (TIA) ? a stroke that lasts a few minutes (ministroke), family history of stroke or heart disease, high blood pressure, smoking cigarettes, using birth control pills or other hormone therapy, obesity, and diabetes.

Treatment for stroke victims varies and depends on the type of stroke suffered. In the case of an ischemic stroke, doctors must restore blood flow to the brain as quickly as possible, typically by dissolving the clot with drugs. In a hemorrhagic stroke, surgery may be used to stop the excess blood from filling the brain cavity. All the same, you have already taken the
first step to possibly saving someone's life by asking about stroke and its causes.

Alice!
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