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Strokes and mini-strokes

Strokes are scary! The devastating long-term deficits that sometimes follow a stroke make strokes one of the events that our patients dread most.

What is a stroke? — A stroke occurs when the blood supply to part of the brain is reduced or stopped. The part of the brain deprived of the oxygen and nutrients carried in the blood then begins to die and does not function properly.

There are two main types of strokes: ischemic (clots) and hemorrhagic (bleeds). An ischemic stroke occurs when an artery carrying blood to the brain is blocked. This type of stroke is the most common, accounting for around 85% of all strokes. Ischemic strokes can either be thrombotic or embolic. In a thrombotic stroke, a blood clot (thrombus) forms in an artery and directly blocks blood flow to the brain. In an embolic stroke, a blood clot or piece of debris called plaque forms elsewhere in the body (usually the heart or the main arteries in the neck), then breaks away and flows into the head where it blocks an artery in the brain. Hemorrhagic strokes (again, accounting for about 15% of all strokes) occur when an artery in the brain ruptures, causing blood to spill out (a hemorrhage), which also deprives affected brain tissue of necessary oxygen and nutrients.

What are the symptoms? — The symptoms of a stroke differ, depending on the part of the brain affected and the extent of the damage. Symptoms following a stroke come on suddenly and may include:

- Weakness, numbness, or tingling in the face, arm or leg, especially on one side of the body
- Trouble walking, dizziness, loss of balance or coordination
- Difficulty speaking or understanding
- Difficulty with vision
- Difficulty swallowing
- Severe headache with no known cause

If you experience any of these symptoms, it is crucial that you get to the hospital as soon as possible. If we can diagnosis a stroke quickly, we can sometimes treat those strokes caused by clots with clot-dissolving medicines. This treatment only works if the medicines are given within three to six hours after symptoms start.

What's a "ministroke"? — A transient ischemic attack (TIA) is often referred to as a ministroke because it is just like a stroke except that the associated symptoms resolve within 24 hours. TIAs occur when the blood supply to the brain is reduced for a short time without causing permanent damage. It is important to have TIAs evaluated because their presence increases the risk of having a bigger stroke.

How can I prevent a stroke? — To prevent strokes, it is important to modify those risk factors that we know increase the risk of strokes:

- If you have diabetes, make sure it is under tight control.
- If you have high cholesterol levels or high blood pressure, it is essential that these are controlled.
- If you smoke, stop.
- Only drink alcohol in moderation.
- Exercise regularly and keep a healthy weight.
- Some people may also benefit from taking an aspirin or other blood thinner each day. Because these medicines can also cause problems, it is a good idea to review the risks and benefits of these medicines with your physician before deciding to take them regularly.

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