

Think Fast for Stroke

It may be hard to escape from the word 'stroke' in Malaysia but how many of us actually know what do when the condition strikes a loved one? **Dr Loh Pei Kee**, Consultant Neurologist at Ara Damansara Medical Centre shares her insight on immediate actions when stroke hits and possible measures that could be taken to avoid it altogether.

According to the World Stroke Organisation, stroke is the second cause of death in the world and the most common life-threatening neurological disorder, claiming a life every 6 seconds. It is estimated that 1 in 6 people will have a stroke in their lifetime and it continues to be the leading cause of death for people above the age of 60.

Furthermore, it has also become the fifth leading mortality cause amongst people aged 15 to 59, unprecedentedly affecting the younger demography.

"The majority of the patients that we see are still above 60 but nowadays we do see patients from younger age groups coming in with stroke, albeit uncommon," says Dr Loh.

What about stroke that makes almost all age groups susceptible to the disease? An ischemic stroke occurs when blood supply to the brain is disrupted due to a clot in an artery leading to the brain. The ensuing oxygen starvation results in the death of brain cells, causing brain damage and loss of function in limbs. Stroke is capable of causing permanent damage, including paralysis and impairment in speech, comprehension, and memory. The damaging clot forms due to a wide variety of reasons including predisposed conditions for thrombosis and auto-immune diseases as well as unhealthy lifestyle practices such as smoking and lack of physical activity.

Text: Eswaren Sekar

Thankfully it's not all doom and gloom when someone experiences stroke either.

"As long as the patient is brought to the hospital within 4 and a half hours of having stroke there is a strong chance of full recovery. We will immediately start with the acute treatment, giving the patient thrombolytic therapy to unclog the blockage in the artery to reverse the stroke," Dr Loh shares.

"But if the patient comes in beyond the time period, and the thrombolytic therapy is contraindicated for any reason like bleeding, then we will give them the standard form of anti-thrombotic medications such as anti-platelets like aspirin," she adds.

Meanwhile, long-term treatments for stroke patients include treating the sugar levels should they have diabetes, maintaining blood pressure, controlling cholesterol and prescribing long-term blood thinners. Such treatments also depend on the complications arising from the stroke, such as healing bed sores due to immobility caused by paralysis and infections should there be any.

"It's important to be aware of the many different signs or symptoms of stroke so that the patient can be brought to the hospital within 4 and a half hours. Depending on the location of the clot, and which part of the brain is affected,

the indications can range from weakness especially on one side of the body, loss of sensation, facial droop, double vision, dizziness and unsteady gait to being comatose. It's a range depending on the size of the stroke as well as the location. So, any

loss of brain function we have to suspect that it's stroke until proven otherwise," cautions Dr Loh.

As a rule of thumb, doctors recommend the mnemonic FAST to help detect and enhance responsiveness to the needs of a person having a stroke. The acronym stands for Facial Drooping, Arm Weakness, Speech Difficulties, and Time to Call Emergency Services. Since most of the time even the patients themselves are not aware that they have had a stroke, it is important for the people around them to be aware of the symptoms so that immediate medical attention could be given to the patient.

Once the patient has been rushed to the hospital and the treatments have been administered, what remains is the road to recovery. Dr Loh shares that the recuperation period again depends on the size and location of the stroke.



Dr Loh Pei Kee

"Patients of milder stroke cases may recover very fast, from within 24 hours to just a few days or weeks, almost returning to their baseline. On the other hand, patients who had suffered larger strokes may take months and years to recover, or never recover at all. Apart

from the stroke's size and location it also depends on the amount of rehabilitation the patients undergo and their age as younger individuals recover better compared to the elderly," she says.

It is also common to find recovering stroke patients to be in a constant state of fatigue as they channel their energy towards getting their strength back. Plus, if their motor function is affected and they are weak, they need more energy to put in more effort to move the limbs compared to a normal individual. In addition, some cases of seizures among the patients have been observed as well, due to the scarring on the brain caused by the stroke.

"Leading a healthy lifestyle is vital in avoiding stroke from recurring as well as to prevent it from the beginning. Regular exercise, a balanced diet, and constant check-ups are necessary to lower the chances of having stroke," imparts Dr Loh. ■

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