Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center

PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

Understanding Strokes

This information explains what a stroke is and what to do if you or someone you are with is having a stroke.

In this resource, the words “you” and “your” refer to you or someone you are with.

About strokes

A stroke is when blood stops going to part of your brain. This can happen if a blood vessel that sends blood to your brain is blocked or leaking. This prevents your brain from getting enough oxygen. When it does not get enough blood and oxygen, the cells die and your brain stops working as it should.

It’s important that you, your family and friends know the signs of a stroke and what to do to get help. The longer your brain does not get enough blood, the more likely it will affect your body. When strokes are not treated right away, they can cause long term disability or death.

Call 911 right away if you think you or someone you are with is having a stroke. Even if you are not sure it’s a stroke, call 911 right away. Acting fast can prevent brain damage and save your life.

Strokes and cancer

People with cancer are at a higher risk of having a stroke than people without cancer.

Sometimes people with cancer may confuse signs of a stroke with side effects of their treatment. **If you have any signs of a stroke, call 911 right away.** Do not wait to see if your symptoms get better with time.

Visit www.stroke.org for more information about what increases your risk of having a stroke.

Signs of a Stroke

Call 911 right away if you or someone you are with are showing any of the following signs of a stroke:

- **Numbness or weakness in your face, arm, or leg.** You may have sudden numbness or weakness, especially on one side of your body. For example, one side of your mouth may droop when you try to smile.
- **Trouble speaking or understanding.** You may feel confused, slur your words, or have trouble understanding what people are saying to you.
- **Problems seeing through one or both eyes.** You may have blurry vision or have trouble seeing at all.
- **Trouble walking.** You may stumble, lose your balance, or feel dizzy.
- **A headache.** You may get a sudden, very bad headache.

If you think you are having a stroke, call 911 right away. Do not drive yourself to the hospital. Emergency medical technicians (EMTs) can start treating you on the way to your closest emergency room.

Act FAST

Use the letters in F.A.S.T to remember how to know if someone is having a stroke.

If you see any of these symptoms, call 911 right away.

F	**Face**	Ask the person to smile. Does one side of their face droop? Is the person's smile uneven? Is their face numb?
A	**Arm**	Ask the person to raise both arms. Does one arm move downward? Is one arm weak or numb?
S	**Speech**	Ask the person to say something. Is their speech slurred or strange?
T	**Time**	Time to call 911. **If they have any signs of a stroke, call 911 right away.** Getting help right away can prevent brain damage or death.

If you have questions or concerns, contact your healthcare provider. A member of your care team will answer Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Outside those hours, you can leave a message or talk with another MSK provider. There is always a doctor or nurse on call. If you're not sure how to reach your healthcare provider, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

Understanding Strokes - Last updated on August 4, 2025
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