

A stroke happens when a blood clot blocks an artery or blood vessel in the brain, or when a blood vessel in the brain bursts. Either of these events can mean that the part of the brain nearby cannot get enough blood and oxygen and may become damaged or die. Anybody can have a stroke, but strokes are usually seen in people aged over 55. High blood pressure and raised blood fats are major risk factors for stroke. Lifestyle factors, the natural ageing process, the effects of infection with HIV, and the side-effects of some anti-HIV drugs can all contribute to an increased risk of stroke.

But it is good to know that regular monitoring can help tell if you have a risk of stroke, and that you can reduce your risk of having a stroke.

Symptoms

Usual symptoms of stroke include sudden numbness or weakness in the face, arm or leg, especially on one side of the body. Confusion, disorientation, difficulty speaking or understanding, difficulty seeing, walking or balancing are also usual symptoms, as is a sudden severe headache with no obvious cause.

Types of stroke

A 'mini-stroke', or transient ischaemic attack, happens when blood supply in part of the brain is cut off temporarily. Although symptoms are very similar to a major stroke, the effects normally last less than 24 hours. However, it is a warning that part of the brain is not getting enough blood and should be taken very seriously.

An ischaemic stroke happens when a blood clot forms, blocking an artery or blood vessel in the brain. This can be the result of a build-up of cholesterol in the arteries over the years, either in the brain or in another part of the body, with the clot traveling to the brain in the bloodstream.

The other type of major stroke is a haemorrhagic stroke, which occurs when a blood vessel in or around the brain bursts, causing bleeding or haemorrhage. Having high blood pressure puts pressure on the walls of arteries, increasing the chance of a blood vessel bursting.

Effects of stroke

The effects of a stroke vary from person to person, and depend on which part of the brain is affected and how severe the damage is. In some people the effects are quite minor, with full recovery in a short space of time. However, in some people stroke can cause permanent disability, even death.

Common problems resulting from a stroke include weakness or paralysis on one side of the body, speech difficulties, and difficulties in understanding. Mental health problems such as depression and emotional problems are also common.

Diagnosis

A number of medical tests can be used to diagnose stroke. These include measuring blood pressure and cholesterol, chest X-rays, and electrocardiograms (ECG) to check the activity of the heart. Brain scans can determine the extent of damage to the brain, and an ultrasound of the arteries in the neck can check blood flow to the brain.

It is possible that you will have some of these tests, such as checks on blood pressure and cholesterol, performed routinely at your HIV clinic. These can be used to monitor your risk of stroke.

Treatment

If you develop any of the signs or symptoms of a stroke, it is important to get treatment as soon as possible. Drugs can be prescribed to reduce the risk of stroke in the first place, or the chances of a second stroke. These

include medication to control blood pressure. Aspirin is very commonly prescribed as it makes the blood less likely to clot.

It may be necessary to go into hospital after having a stroke to make sure that your health is stabilised and in some cases surgery may be necessary.

Rehabilitation

Rehabilitation is used to help re-learn skills that were lost because of stroke and to learn new skills or ways of coping with a permanent disability.

Physiotherapists can help with balance, posture and motion; occupational therapists with day-to-day activities; speech therapists with communication problems; and, psychologists with emotional and mental health issues.

The amount of time it takes to recover and the extent of recovery varies between people and depends on the amount of damage caused by the stroke.

Prevention

Stopping smoking, eating a diet low in saturated fat, and taking regular moderate exercise all reduce the risk of stroke. If you are taking HIV treatment you should be regularly monitored for risk factors such as high blood fats and high blood pressure, and discuss with your doctor your options to counter these.