

Avoid a stroke - know your blood pressure

During Stroke Week, 28 October- 3 November 2013, the Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa (HSF) wants to remind South Africans that by knowing their blood pressure, they can reduce their chances of having a stroke.

Stroke victims are becoming younger and younger, with ever-increasing incidences of people in their 30s having a stroke and the HSF wants to raise awareness around strokes and the serious consequences they can have for survivors.

"Stroke is the 3rd biggest killer in South Africa and is a much greater threat than most of us realise," warns Dr Vash Mungal-Singh, CEO of the HSF. "It is a very real issue that many people are not aware of. They think it is something that happens to older people, but we are increasingly starting to see strokes in younger people too."

In South Africa, 240 people suffer a stroke each day and of these, about a quarter (67 people) dies every day. This means that about three-quarters will survive but face the serious disability that goes along with it - 50% of these survivors will have some kind of serious disability such as brain damage, weakness or paralysis, pain, speech problems and memory or emotional disturbances. Statistics from the World Stroke Organisation show that one in six people worldwide will have a stroke in their lifetime.

"A stroke is devastating, even if it doesn't cause your death," says Dr Mungal-Singh. "The consequences of having a stroke can be very sad." In addition, society tends to ostracise stroke survivors and the stigma that is attached to disability impacts heavily on many stroke survivors. However, with proper care and the appropriate treatment, the quality of life of stroke survivors can be vastly improved and the chances of recovery can also be increased.

It is vital that South Africans regularly check their blood pressure, as this is one of the biggest risk factors for a stroke. Hypertension, or high blood pressure, affects one in four South Africans over 15 years old and is particularly concerning in those under 45 years old.

"It is imperative that people know what their blood pressure is. High blood pressure is often called the 'silent killer' because people don't show any signs or symptoms but the consequences of high blood pressure can be deadly."

Obesity adds to risk

Obesity also increases ones risk for hypertension, which in turn significantly increases ones chances of having a stroke or suffering from other diseases of lifestyle.

The recent national health survey found that 1 in 3 men and 2 in 3 women in South Africa are overweight or obese. She says that this is a major health problem in our country. With National Obesity Week (15 to 19 October), the HSF

encourages all South Africans to take charge of their weight and health.

By making small changes to your lifestyle, you can vastly reduce your chances of having a stroke in the first place. "Up to 80% of stroke and heart disease can be prevented by adopting a healthy lifestyle." The HSF recommends eating a healthy, balanced diet, choosing a variety of foods and being conscious of keeping to recommended portions. Avoid or quit smoking and tobacco products and incorporate regular physical activity into your daily life.

The South African diet has also been shown to be very high in salt; up to 11 grams per day - more than double what the World Health Organisation (WHO) recommends (5g/1 teaspoon of salt a day, which includes salt added to foods during cooking and to the plate, as well as those 'hidden' in processed and convenience foods).

All of these lifestyle changes will have massive health benefits, such as helping with weight control and managing blood pressure, which will then reduce ones risk for developing a stroke.

Warning signs

Dr Mungal-Singh says it is important that people are aware of what a stroke looks and feels like. To help simplify the concept, the Foundation uses the FAST acronym: F = Face, A = Arms, S = Speech and T = Time.

Signs to look out for include sudden facial drooping or a lack of mobility in one side of the face; sudden weakness in one of the arms; sudden abnormal speech or the slurring of words. If any of these symptoms are observed, the time factor is critical. The faster people react and the sooner a stroke victim reaches a hospital, the greater their chances of survival and minimising disability.

Details of free blood pressure screenings around the country are available on the HSF website. Members of the public are also invited to become donors to the HSF. They will form part of a new research fund that the Foundation is currently working on. For more information, go to www.heartfoundation.co.za or Facebook at www.facebook.com/HeartStrokeSA.

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