Wellness Snapshot

Understanding Stroke



What is a stroke?

A stroke, also known as a cerebrovascular accident (CVA) or brain attack, is a medical emergency that happens when blood cannot reach part of the brain. There are two main types:

- **Ischemic Stroke**: This is the most common type, accounting for about 87% of all strokes. It happens when a blood vessel supplying the brain becomes blocked, usually by a blood clot or plaque buildup, cutting off oxygen and blood flow.
- **Hemorrhagic Stroke**: It occurs when a weakened blood vessel in the brain leaks or ruptures, causing bleeding into or around the brain tissue, increasing pressure.

Without blood, brain cells start to die within minutes. Fast treatment can save lives and reduce long-term damage.

Who is most at risk for a stroke?

Stroke risk is affected by both modifiable and non-modifiable factors. Lifestyle habits such as smoking, physical inactivity, excess weight, and heavy alcohol use can increase risk, as can some medical conditions including high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes, sleep apnea, and heart disease. Factors you cannot control, such as age, sex, race and ethnicity, and a family history of stroke, also play an important role. Understanding your risk factors and addressing those that are modifiable can help reduce your chances of having a stroke.

What are the warning signs of stroke?

Use the acronym BE FAST to remember the warning signs of a stroke and what to do if they appear:

- **Balance:** Look for a sudden loss of balance.
- **Eyes:** Watch for sudden vision loss or changes in one or both eyes.
- **Face:** Smile. Does one side of the face droop?
- **Arms:** Raise both arms. If you or someone else is having a stroke, one arm will sag or drop awkwardly.
- **Speech:** You or someone may slur your or their speech or have difficulty choosing the right words.
- **Time:** Time is critical! If you see any of these warning signs, call your local emergency number right away (e.g., 911 in Canada and the U.S., or 112 in the European Union). Even if symptoms go away, this may be a “mini-stroke” (TIA), which is a warning that a bigger stroke could happen. If possible, try to track when symptoms start to help healthcare providers choose the best treatment options.