Causes of Stroke in Young Adults

When most people think of stroke, they likely think of older adults. But a recent report conducted by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention—and published in the Annals of Neurology—has confirmed that strokes in young adults are on the rise. In fact, between 1995 and 2008, the amount of people age 15 to 44 hospitalized for stroke increased by more than a third.

What is causing the growth of stroke in this younger population? Researchers from the CDC speculate it may be blamed, in part, on the rising number of young people with diseases typically associated with older adults, such as type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure and high cholesterol.

BREAKDOWN OF STATISTICS
The objective of the study was to uncover acute stroke hospitalization rates for children and young adults as well as the prevalence of stroke risk factors among children and young adults. The researchers chose to study hospitalizations during a 14-year time period from 1995 to 2008.

The report found that in all age groups and in both sexes, except girls age 5 to 14, ischemic stroke hospitalizations substantially rose. In men age 35 to 44, ischemic strokes increased 50 percent over the 14-year period. There was a 46 percent rise in 15- to 34-year-old men. Young boys age 5 to 14 saw a roughly 51-percent increase. In women the increase in ischemic strokes was broken down as follows: 35- to 44-year-olds saw a 29-percent increase, 15- to 34-year-olds had a 23-percent increase and for those age 5 to 14 the increase was less than 3 percent.

Nearly one in three ischemic stroke patients who were 15 to 34 years old (as well as over half of those age 35 to 44) had high blood pressure. Furthermore, a fourth of patients in the 15 to 34 age range who experienced ischemic strokes had diabetes as well. One in four female patients in this age population smoked, as did one in three males (age 15 to 44). According to the report’s findings, many others were obese and also had high cholesterol.

RISK FACTORS
The National Stroke Association breaks risk factors into “controllable” and “uncontrollable.” In the former category, it lists high blood pressure, atrial fibrillation, high cholesterol, diabetes and atherosclerosis. Controllable lifestyle risks include tobacco use/smoking, alcohol use and obesity. Uncontrollable risks include age, gender, race, family history, previous stroke or TIA, fibromuscular dysplasia and a hole in the heart.

As mentioned, common risk factors for stroke include diabetes, as well as high blood pressure, smoking, obesity and high cholesterol. During the 14-year period between 1995 and 2008, researchers discovered that diabetes, cholesterol and use of tobacco had risen in adolescents and young adults experiencing stroke.

Though this report doesn’t prove what has caused the increase in stroke hospitalizations, it should act as a wake-up call to young adults, as a healthy lifestyle is one of the most crucial ingredients in a prevention plan.

PREVENTION
The National Stroke Association claims that up to 80 percent of all strokes can be prevented by working with a health care provider to lessen your risk. Experts from the Association suggest taking the following measures to reduce your chance of experiencing stroke:

- **Know your blood pressure.** If left untreated, high blood pressure is a key risk factor for stroke.
- **Recognize atrial fibrillation.** This irregular heartbeat raises stroke risk by 500 percent.
- **Stop smoking.** Not only does this habit injure blood vessel walls and raise blood pressure, it also doubles your risk of stroke.
- **Regulate your alcohol consumption.** Associated with stroke in many studies, alcohol should be used in moderation.
- **Be familiar with cholesterol levels.** If they’re too high, it can clog arteries and cause stroke.
- **Manage diabetes.** Obtain help from a health care professional to control health problems.
- **Exercise and diet.** Five is the magic number here. Do some sort of exercise five times a week and eat five servings of fruits and vegetables each day.
- **Treat circulation problems.** Fatty deposits can block arteries and cause stroke if left untreated.
- **Identify a transient ischemic attack (TIA).** Recognize and treat a TIA to decrease your risk of stroke.

Of course, not all strokes can be prevented. Sudden confusion, difficulty speaking, trouble seeing, walking, dizziness and severe headache with an unknown cause are all symptoms of stroke. Learn to look for the signs so you can react quickly.

Resources are available online at www.advanceweb.com/pt

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