Emergency treatment for a stroke

A stroke is a condition that affects the brain. It can be very serious, and needs emergency treatment. But many people go on to make a good recovery.

We've looked at the best and most up-to-date research to produce this information. You can use it to talk to your doctor and decide which treatments are right for you.

What is a stroke?

A stroke happens when the blood supply to part of the brain is cut off. It's extremely dangerous. If brain cells go too long without a supply of blood, they will die.

There are two main causes for a stroke. The most common is a blood clot. If a blood clot gets stuck in a blood vessel in the brain, it can block the flow of blood. This damages the part of the brain that's no longer getting a supply of blood.

A stroke can also be caused by bleeding. If a blood vessel bursts in or near your brain, the bleeding can cause damage and lead to a stroke.

What are the symptoms?

Strokes usually happen quickly and without any warning. The symptoms can be very serious. But the symptoms someone has in the first few days after a stroke may not last forever.

A stroke can cause someone to feel weak or numb on one side of their body. They may not be able to move that side of their body at all. They may feel dizzy and have trouble walking. One side of their face may droop.

Someone who's had a stroke may have trouble speaking, or not understand what's being said to them. They may have problems seeing out of one or both of their eyes. Some people pass out. A stroke can also cause a very severe headache. Some people have trouble swallowing.

A stroke is an emergency. It's very important to get medical attention straight away. However, the ambulance or paramedics may not take you to the nearest hospital. That's because people do better at hospitals with specialist stroke units. It may be better to go slightly further to a hospital that can provide specialised care.

What treatments work?

If you've had a stroke, you'll need emergency treatment in a hospital. You may be given fluid through a tube. Some people need a tube that's put into their mouth to help them breathe.
Emergency treatment for a stroke

Someone who's had a stroke will need several scans and tests. These tests can tell doctors what type of stroke someone has had. The treatments for a stroke depend on whether it was caused by a blood clot or by bleeding.

Treatments for a stroke caused by a blood clot

Most strokes are caused by a blood clot that blocks a blood vessel. Doctors may use medicines to try to get rid of the clot or get blood flowing normally again.

**Aspirin** is well-known as a painkiller. But it also stops blood clotting as easily. There's good research to show that being given aspirin within 48 hours of having a stroke reduces your risk of dying or being severely disabled.

Because aspirin stops your blood clotting, there's a risk it could make you bleed more easily. There's a small risk of bleeding in the brain (a haemorrhage). In studies, there were two extra brain haemorrhages for every 1,000 people who took aspirin. Experts agree that the benefits of aspirin outweigh the risk of side effects.

Although aspirin helps to stop your blood clotting, it won't dissolve clots that are already there. Drugs to dissolve blood clots are called **thrombolytic drugs**. The one that's used in the UK is called alteplase (brand name Actilyse). It's given as an IV drip. It needs to be given as soon as possible after someone has a stroke. Guidelines for doctors say it has to be given within three hours.

There's research to show that clot-dissolving drugs make it less likely that someone will die of their stroke or need full-time care afterwards. But these drugs can have serious side effects. They can increase the risk of bleeding in the brain (a haemorrhage). In studies, an extra 25 people died of a brain haemorrhage for every 1,000 people who took alteplase. Because of this risk, alteplase isn't suitable for everyone. Doctors have to balance the risks against the benefits.

Drugs called **anticoagulants** may also be used if your stroke was caused by a blood clot. They're sometimes called blood-thinning drugs. They don't dissolve blood clots, but they can stop them getting bigger. The standard anticoagulant is called heparin. It's given as an injection.

Anticoagulants don't seem to help people recover from a stroke. But they can prevent some health problems that sometimes happen alongside a stroke. People who take anticoagulants may be less likely to get a blood clot in their legs (a deep vein thrombosis) or in their lungs (a pulmonary embolism). These can be serious. A blood clot in your lungs is especially dangerous.

Anticoagulants can have side effects. Like clot-dissolving drugs, they can cause bleeding in the brain. Research has found there's an extra one person who gets bleeding in the brain for every 131 people who are treated. The exact risk depends on your dose. Doctors have to balance the risks of this treatment against the benefits.
Treatment for a stroke caused by bleeding

If the stroke was caused by bleeding, the person may need surgery. This is to repair the broken blood vessel and remove the extra blood that's pooled in the brain.

Surgery for a stroke has improved over time. Recent studies suggest that modern surgical techniques can reduce the risk of dying of a stroke or needing full-time care afterwards.

What will happen?

It's very difficult to say what will happen after a stroke, especially at first. Some people go on to make a good recovery, and can live at home and take care of themselves. Research shows that one-half to two-thirds of all people who've had a stroke recover well enough to live at home three months later. Some people recover, but are left with a disability. And it is possible to die from a stroke.

It's difficult to say how someone's symptoms will change in the weeks and months after a stroke. But there's a lot to be hopeful about. Research shows that being treated by specialists in a stroke team, such as a physiotherapist or a speech therapist, can help reduce the disability someone has after a stroke.

Having a stroke puts you at risk of having another one. So, doctors often recommend treatment to lower the risk. To read more, see our information on preventing a stroke.

Caring for someone who's had a stroke

Caring for someone who has had a stroke can be physically and emotionally demanding. Carers may have to help with dressing, feeding and washing. They may have to change their own lifestyle to be able to do all these things.

Carers say the biggest problems are feeling isolated and not getting enough sleep. To avoid becoming ill themselves, it's important for carers to realise that they may not be able to do everything themselves. They may need extra help at home. Or they may need to arrange for someone else to take over the care for a time, so they can have a break.

Support groups can help carers feel less isolated. Your doctor can give you advice and put you in touch with organisations that provide help and support. The Stroke Association is a charity that offers information and support to people who've had a stroke and their families. You can find out more at their website (http://www.stroke.org.uk).