

PART 9

Appendix - Special Bonus Report - Endnotes

Appendix:

Stroke: The Silent Killer

By Robert W. Bly, Publisher

It happened on a Thursday morning.

I was at my office, chatting on the telephone with a client and taking notes with a pen, when I became temporarily unable to speak or write.

My hand, suddenly detached from my control like a marionette with a broken string, dragged the pen across the pad, unable to form the loops and lines of letters. My jaw went slack. I got through the conversation with “uh-huh’s” and “mmm’s,” the only sounds I could make, and my client never knew what was happening to me.

What I had suffered, my family doctor Phil Desplat³ told me, was a TIA, or Transient Ischemic Attack.

A TIA, which is a temporary decrease of blood flow to the brain, is a warning sign of an impending stroke.³ In fact, a stroke is simply an interruption of the blood supply to the brain.²

Since fast action can save your life if stroke should strike, you should be aware of these common stroke symptoms:¹

- Weakness or numbness in an arm or leg, or loss of use of that limb.
- Slurred speech ranging from difficulty in pronouncing words to a total inability to talk.

- Temporary vision problems – blurring, dimming, or blindness in one eye.
- A temporary inability to understand what others are saying or to make sense of words while reading.
- Tingling or numbness around the mouth, usually restricted to one side.
- Dizziness or a sense of feeling off-balance.

We think of stroke as an old person’s disease, but it’s not. According to the National Stroke Council, strokes kill 150,000 Americans each year and leave another 200,000 disabled – ¹ and one out of three of these stroke victims is under 65.² I was 42 when I had mine.

Someone has a stroke in this country every 53 seconds.⁶ If I could wave a magic wand and make one change in the world with regards to stroke, it would be to make sure every adult male – no matter what his age – knew the early warning signs of stroke and what to do about them.

The “what to do” part is simple. If you’re having any of the symptoms I just described, immediately call your doctor or 911 and have someone drive you straight to the emergency room.

Why? Because if you’re indeed having a stroke, a quick trip to the ER can get it under control and minimize or eliminate any serious long-term damage – thanks in part to a new drug, TPA (tissue plasminogen activator). When given within 3 hours after the stroke starts, TPA can actually reverse paralysis and cause vision to return.⁷

Dr. Jesse Weinberger, a neurologist specializing in stroke at Mount Sinai Medical Center and author of *Contemporary Diagnosis and Management of Stroke* (Handbooks in Health Care), stresses that speed of treatment is critical. “TPA can reduce risk of damage from stroke by 50 percent, but only 1 percent of stroke patients make it to the hospital in time for it to be effective,” he says. “When in doubt, go to the ER any way. If it’s not stroke, the worst that happened is you wasted a few hours.”⁸

However, many stroke victims have no visible symptoms. In 1998, for example, 21.8 million people had “silent strokes” – blockage or rupture of a blood vessel causing injury to the brain without discernible symptoms.⁴ Sometimes silent stroke results in impaired memory, which can be mistakenly attributed to Alzheimer’s disease.

To prevent these silent strokes before they happen, an annual check-up is critical.

“The main thing is to control risk factors before stroke strikes,” says Dr. Weinberger, who estimates that half of all strokes are preventable.

The starting point is to control blood pressure, universally recognized as a major risk factor for stroke. According to Dr. Weinberger, simply reducing blood pressure from 130/90 to 120/80 can cut the risk of stroke in half for a younger person.

In addition to checking blood pressure, men should have an electrocardiogram at their annual physical. Your doctor should check your EKG for atrial fibrillation

Atrial fibrillation (heart spasms) can cause blood to pool in the heart, where it coagulates. Clots break off from the coagulated blood and then travel up through the arteries to the brain. When he sees atrial fibrillation, Dr. Weinberger often prescribes a mild blood thinner, which can cut stroke risk in these cases by 75 percent in older men.

The other important check is for the doctor to listen to nodes on your neck for blockage in the carotid artery. Such blockages cause a distinct noise detectable in 50 percent of patients.

If Dr. Weinberger finds blockage in this artery, he again prescribes a mild blood thinner and recommends reduction of cholesterol. If the blockage in the carotid artery is severe – greater than 70 percent – surgery can cut the risk of stroke in half, he says.

Whether your exam shows you to be at risk for stroke or not, there are steps you can take to improve cardiovascular health and lower your chances of suffering from stroke and other heart illnesses.

After my stroke, Dr. Alan Grossman, my cardiologist, gave me advice that was simple and expected: Eat less, lose weight, go on a low-fat and low-sodium diet, avoid caffeine, lower my cholesterol, and exercise more. (He was glad I didn't smoke, since smoking increases your risk of stroke and other cardiovascular illness.)

Fortunately for me, a recent nominee to the Couch Potato Hall of Fame, you don't have to work out like the cover model on Men's Health magazine to get the cardiovascular benefits from exercise you need. Dr. Weinberger says a brisk walk for half an hour a day, four days a week, is sufficient to reduce your risk of stroke.

Nutritional supplements may also be just what the doctor ordered. Dr. Grossman told me to take 400 micrograms a day of folic acid to lower my slightly elevated homocysteine level of 10 micromoles per liter (it should not exceed 9), a condition known to increase risk of cardiovascular illness.⁴

Dr. Weinberger recommends supplementing with vitamin B6 and vitamin B12 in addition to the folic acid. He cites a New England Journal of Medicine study showing that increasing intake of folic acid by just 200 micrograms daily can reduce plasma

homocysteine concentration by 4 micromoles per liter, significantly lowering the risk of vascular disease.¹⁰

Dr. Kenneth Kensey, author of *The Blood Thinner Cure* (Contemporary Publishing), advises drinking 12 glasses of water a day to maintain optimum cardiovascular health.

“People with thick blood are at greater risk for stroke,” says Dr. Kensey. “By increasing your water intake only 3 percent, you can cut your blood thickness in half.” Drinking water, he claims, softens and liquefies your red blood cells.

When it comes to risk factors for cardiovascular illness, blood thickness is as critical as blood pressure, says Dr. Kensey. Think of your body as a piping system. The thicker the fluid being pumped, the more the pump (your heart) has to work to get the fluid (the blood) through the piping (your arteries) – and the greater the pressure (blood pressure) in the system.

But be careful. While water dilutes and thins the blood, your favorite beverages probably don't. “When doctors say drink 8 to 12 glasses of water a day, we mean water and nothing else – not juice, coffee, iced tea, beer, or soda,” says Dr. Kensey.

Those other beverages are diuretics, which cause the body to lose liquid through urination. That means drinking them can actually thicken your blood.

“When it comes to getting enough water, the average American doesn't even come close,” Dr. Kensey warns. “We are a chronically dehydrated society.”

Dr. Kensey also recommends that men give blood frequently. “Donating blood reduces its thickness,” says Dr. Kensey, noting that menstruating women have 25 percent thinner blood than other people – and a low incidence of cardiac illness.⁹

The reason: Red blood cells live 120 days. The young cells are pliable and can compress to easily pass through capillaries half the size of the cell. As red blood cells get older, they lose their flexibility and are harder to pump through the circulatory system.

By donating blood often, you deplete your red blood cell supply. Your body makes more red blood cells, all of which are young, pliable, and therefore easier to pump.

Many physicians tell heart patients to take an aspirin daily. The reason, says Dr. Kensey, is that aspirin thins the blood (by reducing the stickiness of platelets).

Stress, proven to increase blood pressure, also thickens blood. “Under stress, you sweat more and urinate more, which dehydrates your body, increasing blood viscosity,” explains Dr. Kensey.

Dr. Weinberger agrees that stress reduction promotes cardiovascular health: “It may sound strange for a western doctor to say, but I find my daily Tai Chi routine helps me a lot with lowering stress.”

Unfortunately for me, when I had my TIA, I was ignorant of both the symptoms and the treatments – and so I ignored it. That was the biggest mistake I ever made in my life.

Two months later, I had a full-blown stroke at bedtime (once again, my speech had become slurred and I was dizzy). Not knowing these were stroke symptoms or about TPA, I thought I was just tired and went to bed – another big mistake. I was hospitalized for 5 days, until my doctors found the right combination of medications to control my blood pressure without side effects.

I’ve recovered to the point where, if you met me, you wouldn’t know that I had a stroke; my speech and manual dexterity have returned to their normal healthy state.

But, I did experience a mild but permanent loss of balance. It’s not a problem when walking, but in sports and more strenuous activities it’s a real spoiler.

On a recent family hike, the rugged naturalist leading the group seemed puzzled that I was hesitant to cross a stream over slippery stones. “He had a stroke,” my wife told him loudly enough for everyone in the group to hear, turn their heads, and stare. I suppose more of these awkward moments await me.

Let me give you a piece of advice I beg you to follow – even if it seems hokey to you now. Highlight the warning signs in this article with a yellow marker, tear out the page, and either commit it to memory or tape it to your refrigerator door.

Dramatic, I know. Unnecessary for you? I hope. But please do it anyway. It just might save your life.

About the author:

Bob Bly is a freelance writer in Dumont, NJ. He is the author of 50 books, one of which is ironically, *101 Ways to Make Every Second Count: How to Achieve More Success with Less Stress* (Career Press).