

May is "National Stroke Awareness Month", a good time to learn how to avoid a stroke, recognize symptoms, and know what to do.

Strokes are the fourth leading cause of death in the United States. They occur when a blood vessel carrying oxygen to the brain is blocked by a clot or ruptures. A stroke can affect speech, mobility, memory and many other common functions. Strokes aren't only a threat to older adults, they can strike people of all ages. In fact, nearly a quarter of all strokes occur in people younger than age 65.

Stroke symptoms come on suddenly. Knowing the symptoms, then taking immediate action could save a life, and may even help reduce long-term issues. Use the F.A.S.T. test to recognize and respond to stroke symptoms:

F = FACE - Ask the person to smile. Does one side of the face droop?

A = ARMS - Ask the person to raise both arms. Does one arm drift downward?

S = SPEECH - Ask the person to repeat a simple sentence. Does the speech sound slurred or strange?

T = TIME - If you observe any of these signs, call 9-1-1 or quickly get to the nearest hospital.

Some factors that increase your risk for stroke are beyond your control such as age, sex, and race. But there are some risks you can control by making a few lifestyle changes.

A diet that includes plenty of fiber, fruit, vegetables, and foods low in saturated fat, cholesterol and sodium, along with regular exercise, can help lower your cholesterol and blood pressure. If you smoke cigarettes, quitting will lower your risk of having a stroke. And avoid drinking too much alcohol, which causes high blood pressure.

Strokes are sudden and unexpected, leaving family members overwhelmed as they attempt to juggle care giving with career and other daily responsibilities. If you feel you can no longer take care of your loved one by yourself, there are many home care agencies who can help your loved one transition to life after stroke. Trained caregivers provide a variety of services that will assist your loved one in their rehabilitation and restore their independence and dignity.