

# Knowing signs of stroke can decrease damage

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Carroll County Times

May is Stroke Awareness Month and when it comes to strokes, awareness really is the key to mitigating the damage caused by these cerebrovascular events, according to Dr. Sandra Ruby, medical director of the Carroll Hospital stroke program.

The hospital was certified as a primary stroke center beginning in March 2015, meaning patients in Carroll County could be treated there rather than being sent to Sinai Hospital in Baltimore or Northwest Hospital in Randallstown. But in order to take advantage of that local treatment, Ruby said, patients need to know when to come to the emergency room.

"I think the recognition of stroke symptoms is still the biggest key in treatment of these patients because it is so time sensitive," she said. "Weakness, numbness, speech problems, vision problems, balance problems ... with any of those symptoms that come on suddenly, patients should not lay down or rest to see if they go away, but immediately call 911."

People have great powers of rationaliza-

tion, Ruby said, and she has seen patients write off sudden numbness along the left side as having slept in a strange position, only to realize by evening that something is very wrong. At that point, a trip to the hospital is still necessary, she said, but not as beneficial.



Dr. Sandra Ruby

"We rationalize because we don't want to be alarmist and always coming to the ER," Ruby said. "But if it's a sudden onset of these stroke symptoms, it's important that you come to the ER and that we do evaluate you so we can determine if it's something to be concerned about or not."

There are two major types of stroke, Ruby said, ischemic, where blood flow is blocked to a portion of the brain by a clot or narrowing of the blood vessel, and hemorrhagic, where internal bleeding is causing a loss of blood flow. The only way to determine which type of stroke a patient is suffered is via a CAT scan in the hospital, she said, which is vital for determining the type of treatment required — clot busting drugs can be used to break up a clot, but would only cause more bleeding in hemorrhagic strokes.

It is ischemic strokes that are the most

common, Ruby said, and given that they can be so easily treated with medication in many cases, she cannot stress enough how important it is for people to get to the hospital rapidly.

"The percentage of patients that do get the ... clot busting medication is a lot lower than it could be if we could get to see patients quicker," she said. "When patients come to us outside of that window, no longer can we offer that clot busting medication."

Age is one of the biggest risk factors for stroke, as they occur much more commonly in older adults, according to Ruby. In that older population, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes and atrial fibrillation are the common risk factors.

"Atrial fibrillation actually becomes one of the No. 1 risk factors in patients as they get older," Ruby said. "In that case it's clots forming in the heart because of an irregular heart rhythm. The blood doesn't pump effectively from the heart then and as the blood stirs around in the heart, clots can form, and then those clots can be thrown up to the brain which then causes the stroke symptoms."

Stroke may be more common in older adults, but it can affect people of any age, even young children, according to Ruby, which is why it is important that people

learn to recognize the symptoms of stroke in the context of sudden onset, no matter the age of the person affected. In children, trauma such as a car accident, can lead to damage to blood vessels that lead to clotting that can cause an ischemic stroke. For women in their 20s and 30s, hormonal changes associated with pregnancy and oral contraceptives can increase the risk of stroke as well.

"Ultimately, stroke is seen in all ages, that's important to know," Ruby said. "In a younger 20-year-old patient who had a car accident a few weeks ago and has sudden onset of right-sided numbness, we need to recognize that right away as a possible stroke. But it is much more common in older patients."

After recognizing that stroke can happen in any age group and recognizing the symptoms and their rapid onset, the next step is getting to the hospital quickly, and doing it safely.

"We recommend calling 911 to get there quickly. Also, sometimes patients worsen. They develop a little arm weakness, and then it progresses to leg weakness and they are not able to drive. We don't really want them driving in with those symptoms."

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