

## **Fact sheet on Stroke**

### **What is a stroke?**

Stroke is cardiovascular disease. It affects the blood vessels that supply blood to the brain. A stroke is caused either by a blockage of an artery supplying blood to the brain (cerebral thrombosis) or a bleed into the brain for a burst blood vessel (cerebral haemorrhage).

The most common cause of stroke is a blockage of the blood supply (cerebral thrombosis) as a result of a clot forming due to a narrowing of the arteries because of a build up of atheroma or fatty deposits - a condition called atherosclerosis, the underlying cause of cardiovascular diseases.

### **What are the effects of a stroke?**

As a result of loss of blood supply to the brain a particular area may be damaged and so the effects will vary. The most common effects are complete or partial paralysis down one or other side of the body (hemiplegia), which occurs in about 80% of patients. Other common effects are loss of sensation on one side of the body, loss of vision, difficulty with speech, swallowing, loss of concentration, bladder problems and emotional changes.

### **Is recovery possible?**

Recovery for most people is a gradual process often taking months. Most recovery is usually in the first six months, however recovery varies from patient to patient and ranges from minimal disability to continuing impairment. About 30,000 people have a residual disability from stroke – one fifth are unable to walk and up to one half require assistance with daily living.

### **How is a stroke treated?**

At present there is no drug treatment that will improve recovery after a stroke. Depending on the type of stroke either aspirin or an anticoagulant drug, called Warfarin, may be prescribed to reduce risk of a further stroke

Recovery and treatment after a stroke requires a multidisciplinary approach involving the hospital physician, physiotherapist, occupational therapist, speech and language therapist, social worker and family doctor. Once back at home the support of family, family doctor and public health nurse are important and if necessary additional support may be provided by a day hospital and for social support visits to day centres

### **How common is it?**

Each year 10,000 people are admitted to hospital with acute stroke of which about 2,500 will die. Deaths from stroke have been falling however with an ageing population however there is likely to be an increase in the disease.

One in every 8 people will have a stroke at some time in their lives and strokes usually occur in men and women over 65 years of age.

### **Cost**

After dementia, it is the most expensive illness in health and social care costs and these costs exceed those of cancer and coronary heart disease. It is the most expensive disease to diagnose.

### **Risk factors**

High blood pressure, cigarette smoking, obesity, diet and physical inactivity are all modifiable risk factors for stroke. As people get older the risk of stroke increases. In addition those who already have a history of heart disease, high cholesterol, diabetes and transient ischaemic attacks (TIAs or mini strokes) are at an increased risk of stroke.

### **How can strokes be prevented?**

For the population in general following the advice for a healthy heart and lifestyle will also reduce the risk of stroke.

- Have a regular Blood Pressure and Cholesterol check up with your family doctor
- If you smoke, try to stop. For advice and support phone the National Smokers Quitline at 1850 201 203
- Eat more fruit and vegetables and less fatty foods and fries
- Be physically active every day
- Aim to be a healthy weight
- If you drink, do not exceed the recommended upper limits

For those who already have a history of heart disease, it is important to follow carefully the doctor's advice. If prescribed medication to take it as instructed.

For further information see [www.irishheart.ie](http://www.irishheart.ie) or the Irish Heart Foundation's booklet 'Things you should know about stroke'