

# WOMEN'S HEALTH advisor

HELPING WOMEN OVER 50 MAKE INFORMED HEALTH DECISIONS™

# Don't Ignore a "Minor" Stroke

Get prompt treatment to avoid further damage to the brain and prevent a major stroke.

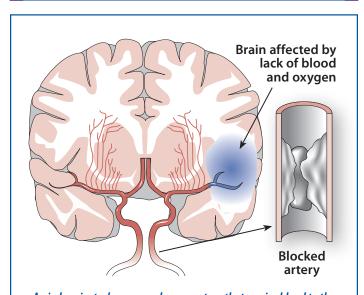
Nearly 40 percent of people who have a transient ischemic attack (TIA) or minor ischemic stroke may experience cognitive impairment, according to a study presented at the American Stroke Association's International Stroke Conference 2010. The study of 140 men and women (average age 67) revealed deficits in "executive functions" such as decision making and mental processing speed.

An ischemic stroke—the most common type—is caused by a disruption in the flow of blood and oxygen in the brain, usually due to plaque or a blood clot. A TIA affects brain function temporarily, for up to 24 hours. By contrast, in a "small" or "minor" ischemic stroke, deficits usually persist for more than 24 hours and there is permanent

damage to the brain, although the damage does not cause serious disability. A magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scan can differentiate between the two—but neither one should be ignored, stresses Dana Leifer, MD, associate profes-

# **SIGNS OF A STROKE**

- Numbness or weakness of the face, arm, or leg, especially on one side of the body
- > Difficulty speaking or understanding speech
- > Visual disturbance in one or both eyes
- > Trouble walking, dizziness, loss of balance
- > Sudden, severe headache



An ischemic stroke occurs when an artery that carries blood to the brain is blocked, cutting off the supply of blood and oxygen. If you experience any signs of a stroke, even if they last for just a few minutes, get medical attention immediately.

sor of neurology at Weill Cornell Medical College and director of the Stroke Unit and the Neurovascular Ultrasound Laboratory at New York-Presbyterian/Weill Cornell.

"Our biggest worry is that someone with a TIA or small stroke may have a major stroke soon. The greatest danger of a large stroke is in the first 48 hours after a TIA or small stroke. In addition, TIA or minor stroke patients may already have had silent minor strokes

they're not aware of. If you have enough minor strokes, they add up to a more significant permanent deficit," says Dr. Leifer.

### **Causes for concern**

The signs of a TIA or minor stroke are the same as for a more major stroke, and, "like a major stroke, they require immediate medical attention," Dr. Leifer emphasizes. "People think these warning signs will pass if they go to sleep. Or they ignore them if they feel better in a few minutes. But in fact, they should call 911 immediately." Another study presented at the International Stroke Conference showed that individuals who had a TIA or minor stroke had a six percent risk of having another stroke or a more severe stroke within a week.

Signs of a TIA or stroke are:

- Sudden numbness or weakness of the face, arm or leg, especially on one side of the body.
- Difficulty speaking or understanding speech, confusion.

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- Visual disturbance, such as problems seeing with one or both eyes.
- Trouble walking, dizziness, loss of balance or coordination.
- Sudden, severe headache with no known cause.

Not all the warning signs occur in every stroke—but even one sign signals an emergency, Dr. Leifer says.

## **Prevention**

Up to 80 percent of strokes are preventable, according to the National Stroke Association. To help prevent a stroke, Dr. Leifer advises the following:

- Keep blood pressure under control. If the higher number (your systolic blood pressure) is above 130 or if the lower number (your diastolic blood pressure) is consistently over 80, you will need to make lifestyle changes and/or take medication to lower your pressure.
- Treat high cholesterol by changing your diet, losing weight, and/or taking medication if prescribed.
  - Manage diabetes.
- Find out if you have atrial fibrillation, an irregular heartbeat that allows blood to collect in the chambers of the heart where it can form a clot that moves into your bloodstream. If you have atrial fibrillation, your doctor may pre-



scribe a blood thinner such as warfarin (Coumadin).

- Quit smoking—smoking doubles your risk of stroke.
- Drink alcohol only in moderation, if at all. While some studies show that drinking up to two alcoholic drinks per day can reduce your risk of stroke, drinking more than this can triple your risk and also can lead to liver disease.
- Exercise regularly—engage in 30 minutes or more of moderate activity five or more days per week.

### Surgery

A stroke often happens when plaque or a clot that's blocking the carotid artery in the neck travels to the brain. Therefore, a narrowing or blockage of the carotid artery, if

# WHAT YOU CAN DO

Get prompt help for a TIA or stroke:

- Keep a list of emergency rescue service numbers, in addition to 911, next to the telephone and in your pocket, wallet, or purse.
- Find out which area hospitals are primary stroke centers that have 24-hour emergency stroke care.
- Know which hospital or medical facility is nearest your home and/or office.

severe, is usually treated with surgery to prevent a stroke from occurring. People who have already had strokes from this or other conditions also can benefit from surgical intervention. Options include carotid artery surgery and carotid artery stenting, a minimally-invasive approach. Both intervention options were shown to be safe and effective in other study results presented at the International Stroke

Conference. 6