

Don't ignore the warning signs of a stroke

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By the time you have read, cogitated and digested this article, someone, somewhere in the UK will have had a stroke, and many of those affected are surprisingly young. Ten thousand of the 150,000 strokes annually occur in people under 55. Most come out of the blue but there are often warning signs that have been ignored — with catastrophic consequences. Don't make the same mistake.

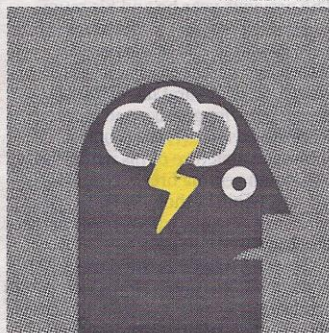
The UK was one of the first countries to recognise the importance of "mini-strokes" — transient ischaemic attacks (TIAs) that cause vague neurological symptoms such as weakness and slurred speech (see below) that often resolve within a few hours. TIAs can be very subtle and are easily dismissed but often herald a bigger threat on the horizon.

Much of the pioneering research in this field has been done by a team led by Peter Rothwell, professor of clinical neurology at the University of Oxford, and his experience in setting up a TIA clinic neatly sums up the dangers.

Initially his rapid-access clinic was based on the same sort of "two-week" model we use to investigate people with suspected cancer. A patient would have what was thought to be a TIA and the A&E department or GP would refer them urgently to the TIA clinic to confirm the diagnosis and treat accordingly.

This worked well for most people but Rothwell's team noticed that at least 10 per cent of those referred were not attending their urgent appointment a week or two later.

Non-attenders are common in outpatient clinics but when Rothwell looked closer, he discovered something alarming — they hadn't



missed their appointment because they had forgotten or felt better, but because they had had a stroke. The rapid-access system was too slow to save them.

Today, the service provided by the NHS is much faster. If you have a suspected TIA you are likely to be seen immediately, or the next day, because if you wait any longer it may be too late. One in ten people who have a TIA will go on to have a full stroke within a few days unless preventive action is taken. And the most important thing to do is to start taking aspirin, which cuts the risk of

an early stroke by as much as 80 per cent. Aspirin's reputation has been somewhat tarnished in recent years amid confusion about who should take it to prevent what, and when, but its use in stroke (and heart attack) is clear-cut. So much so that many stroke experts advocate people self-medicating if they suspect a TIA by chewing an aspirin while they call for help. So what should you look for?

TIAs can cause a wide variety of symptoms and their vague and transient nature means they are easy to confuse with other conditions, particularly migraine. They are caused by tiny blockages in the circulation to the brain and the presentation varies, depending on which part is affected. Symptoms typically include weakness of the face or limbs on one side, clumsiness, visual disturbances and/or slurred speech. But the effects can be very subtle as in the case of a classics scholar who suddenly found he was unable to conjugate Latin verbs.

The best advice is that if you experience any neurological symptom that comes on suddenly and is unfamiliar (eg not like your normal migraine) then you should seek urgent medical advice. And take an aspirin (unless you are allergic to it). Doctors have traditionally not advocated self-medication because of a fear that it may worsen bleeding in the rarer form of haemorrhagic stroke, but in TIA the risks are negligible and the benefits potentially huge.

At the clinic, doctors use scans and other tests to confirm the diagnosis and look for underlying causes that vary from narrowed arteries to high blood pressure and an irregular heartbeat, but it is the taking of humble aspirin that remains the most time-critical.

For more information on TIAs visit stroke.org.uk

The facts about stroke and what to expect

■ Stroke is the fourth single largest cause of death in the UK and, by the age of 75, one in five women and one in six men will have had at least one.

■ Although often fatal (one in four stroke victims is dead within a year) they are also a major cause of long-term disability among the 1.2 million stroke survivors in the UK.

■ A TIA is often the only warning sign. Don't ignore it.