

*Free Stroke Event to Feature Vital Screenings, Advice from Physicians*

If you think you're too young or too healthy to worry about stroke, you might want to think again. It's true that the risk of stroke increases with age, but younger people - particularly those with multiple risk factors - are having strokes in greater numbers, too.

Later this month, Washington Hospital invites all members of the community to learn more about stroke and identify any risk factors they may have during the free Stroke Awareness Day and Screenings event being held on Saturday, March 24.

The event will feature important screening tests for stroke, including blood pressure, blood glucose (diabetes), electrocardiogram (EKG) for atrial fibrillation, and a test for carotid artery disease, as well as a chance to discuss the results of the screenings with Washington Hospital's Stroke Program Medical Director cardiologist Ash Jain, M.D.

"It's always best to learn about stroke before it happens," according to Dr. Jain. "Most risk factors for stroke - such as high blood pressure - build up over time with no outward symptoms. Then you suffer a stroke, which leaves you at risk for permanent disability."

The majority of strokes are caused by blockages of the arterial pathways that deliver oxygen and nutrients to the brain, according to Dr. Jain. As a result, brain cells are literally starved of oxygen and begin to die off, making both prevention and early detection vitally important he says.

Doug Van Houten, R.N., clinical coordinator for the Stroke Program, says Washington Hospital is fairly unique in the level of educational and preventive measures it offers to the community regarding stroke.

"We actually do three kinds of screenings a year, all vascular in nature," he explains. "There's the Abdominal Aortic Aneurysm Screening, which just took place in January, the Peripheral Vascular Disease Screening, which takes place in June, and Stroke Awareness Day and Screening coming up next month."

"We've done this for more than five years now, and I'm not aware of any other programs that perform this same level of education, or provide this degree of advanced health screening for free when it comes to stroke."

The good news is that most of the risk factors being screened for during the Stroke Awareness Day and Screening event are ones that can be reduced through simple lifestyle changes. Others, like atrial fibrillation, require a doctor's care.

Atrial fibrillation is not only the most common type of irregular heartbeat, but also one of the main risk factors for stroke, according to Dr. Jain. In fact, the American Heart Association (AHA) cites data indicating that AF accounts for between 15 percent and 20 percent of strokes in the U.S.

"With atrial fibrillation, it is very important to identify these patients and treat them so that they don't go on to have strokes," Dr. Jain says. "Irregular heartbeat causes heart function to decrease by as much as 30 percent,

and this decrease in function makes people tired, short of breath, and they experience less energy and weakness and tiredness because of this."

While AF and carotid artery disease require medical intervention, Van Houten is a big proponent of tackling many preventable risk factors for stroke - like high blood pressure and obesity - with lifestyle changes like healthy diet and regular exercise.

"Stroke - which is considered up to 80 percent preventable - can be prevented by modifying lifestyle risk factors, which are things people can do on their own," he says. "I often ask people, 'Can you walk around Lake Elizabeth with a friend five times a week? Can you increase your veggies, reduce your soda consumption, and cut down on the fats in your diet?' These are things I try to get people to look closely at."

"According to recent data, less than 1 percent of adults meet the definition for healthy diet. There are so many pretty simple straightforward things that if we can get people to understand the relationship between the risk factor and the disease, we can make the difference in stroke outcomes. I'd much rather prevent strokes than to treat them in the hospital."

Dr. Jain agrees that he would rather help community members prevent stroke than having to treat them in the hospital, but he says he continues to see younger patients - including those in their 40s and 50s - coming to the hospital with stroke. And furthermore, recent research shows that younger people are less likely than older individuals to recognize the signs of stroke.

"Recognizing the signs and symptoms of stroke is important for every member of the community, because the faster people call 9-1-1, the sooner we can treat them and improve outcomes," Dr. Jain says. "Stroke education like Stroke Awareness Day is the first step people can take in reducing their risk of a truly devastating disease process."

Free screenings

If you want to learn about your risk for stroke and talk to experts in stroke care, make sure to attend the Stroke Awareness Day and Screenings being held on Saturday, March 24, in the Conrad E. Anderson, M.D. Auditorium, Rooms A and B, located at 2500 Mowry Avenue (Washington West) in Fremont.

To register for the event, call (800) 963-7070.