

TIA: The Stroke Warning Sign That Could Save Your Life

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It happens in a blink of an eye. An arm or leg goes numb, vision becomes blurred or speech suddenly slurs. It feels like a stroke. But then just as quickly, or in some cases more gradually, the symptoms disappear. And doubt creeps in. Victims are left to wonder whether something is wrong or if medical care is even necessary. The answer is YES!

While some strokes occur without warning and have lasting effects, others are preceded by a “warning,” known as a transient ischemic attack (TIA) or mild stroke. They can last a few minutes or for up to 24 hours. But, unlike a major stroke, these brief attacks which occur when a blood clot interrupts blood flow to the brain produce no lasting visible damage and disappear quickly.

But TIAs are extremely important because they signal the potential for a future stroke. In fact, possibly half of all strokes are preceded by recognized and unrecognized TIAs in the days, weeks, months or years before the event. That is good news for patients who receive immediate and proper diagnosis and medical care for a TIA. Unfortunately though, only about half of the people who experience a TIA are even aware of the event. Studies show that as many as 25 percent of people who suffer a TIA may die within one year and that those who suffer strokes within 48 hours after TIAs often experience more debilitating and potentially deadly strokes.

So it's critical to recognize the symptoms of a stroke and seek medical help immediately, even if the event is brief and the symptoms subside.

In nearby Winston-Salem, the Forsyth Stroke and Neurosciences Center at Forsyth Medical Center (FMC) recently opened the region's first center specializing in the diagnosis and treatment of TIA. Located in a specially designated unit at FMC, this center enables doctors to quickly evaluate and treat patients who have suffered a TIA and reduce the likelihood of a post-TIA stroke. Most patients admitted to the TIA Center are diagnosed within 24 to 36 hours which is much faster than in a traditional outpatient setting where a diagnosis can take three to five days.

When it comes to a stroke or TIA, time is critical! Patients who think they may have suffered a stroke or TIA are admitted for evaluation as soon as they arrive at FMC. So, don't delay. Call 911 immediately, even if the symptoms disappear. While the symptoms of a stroke may last only a few minutes, the effects can last a lifetime.

Stroke is the third leading cause of death in the United States and the No. 1 cause of disability. That is why you should never ignore these symptoms:

- Sudden numbness or weakness in the face, arm or leg, especially on only one side of the body
- Sudden confusion or difficulty speaking or understanding speech
- Sudden trouble with vision, in one or both eyes
- Sudden severe headache with no known cause

As the first medical center in the region to open a center specifically to diagnose and treat TIA, the Forsyth Stroke and Neuroscience Center is also the first in North Carolina to earn national certification by The Joint Commission as a Primary Stroke Center and amongst the top 2 percent of stroke care programs in the country, according to the American Heart Association. While the national door-to-drug treatment time benchmark, as set by the Brain Attack Coalition guidelines, is 60 minutes for patients who present at a hospital with a stroke, at FMC, the door-to-drug treatment time is an average of 47 minutes.

For more information about the new TIA Center at FMC, call toll-free 1-866-628-4578 or visit www.forsythmedicalcenter.org.