

Depression and Stroke

Did you know?

- 40% of stroke survivors will experience depression within the first two months of their stroke recovery. Half of this group will suffer from major depression, while the other half will experience more minor symptoms of depression.
- Another 10% of survivors will experience depression within the first two years of their recovery.
- Another 10-20% will experience depression in the period following the first two years.
- All stroke survivors, regardless of their age, are at risk of depression.
- Many spouses and/or caregivers of stroke survivors experience depression as they adjust to the change in their lives and partners.
- Depression is considered one of the major barriers to stroke recovery.

What are the signs of depression?

It is normal to feel sad following a stroke. However, if the following symptoms reoccur frequently over a period of at least two weeks, you have depression:

- Feeling sad, blue, or down in the dumps
- Loss of interest or enjoyment in favorite activities
- Feeling worthless or guilty
- Trouble sleeping or sleeping too much
- Loss of energy or feeling tired all the time
- Feeling pessimistic or hopeless
- Being anxious or worried
- Thoughts of death or suicide

If a stroke survivor has symptoms of depression, especially thoughts of death or suicide, professional help is needed right away. If not treated, depression can make recovery from stroke much more difficult.

Treatment of depression:

Individuals who receive treatment for depression following their stroke often experience some restored mental and physical abilities such as improved orientation, memory, language abilities and hand-eye coordination.

Anti-depressant drugs are the most common treatment for depression. Patients should work with their doctor to find a medication that is right for them.

What can family/caregivers do to help?

Do not explain away depression!

Many people and/or doctors think of depression as an understandable response to the loss and impairment experiences after a stroke. However, lasting depression can affect the emotional and physical well-being of stroke survivors and their families.

If you feel that someone has been showing symptoms of depression for at least two weeks, make sure that they see a professional who is familiar with stroke-related depression for evaluation and potential treatment for depression. Depression in either stroke survivors or their spouses can hinder stroke recovery.

What can health care professionals do?

Health care professionals should pay attention to the emotional well-being of both stroke survivors and their caregivers, while also emphasizing the role that both survivors and their families play in recovery.

By distributing more information about what to expect from stroke, how to deal with problems that arise and what support structures are available to the family, health care professionals can help stroke survivors and spouses overcome their negative emotional reactions, adapt better to their circumstances, and develop a much more positive attitude towards the future.