

STROKE AWARENESS

MAY BRINGS ATTENTION TO A SERIOUS SILENT KILLER.

BY PENNY DICKERSON

The American Stroke Association reports that someone in the United States has a stroke every 40 seconds, and someone dies from a stroke every four minutes. Stroke is a leading cause of serious long-term disability, with more than 6.5 million stroke survivors currently living in the U.S. In Florida—stroke is the fifth leading cause of death while the state’s death rate is 38.9 per 100,000 population.

To amplify the severity of the cardiovascular disease, May is Stroke Awareness Month—a purposed time to define stroke, share root cause and overall impact on individuals and families.

While stroke is a leading cause of death and disability worldwide, its warning signs and risk factors are often asymptomatic. A stroke occurs when blood flow to the brain is disrupted, either due to a clot blocking a blood vessel (ischemic stroke) or due to bleeding in the brain (hemorrhagic stroke). When the brain is deprived of blood and oxygen, brain cells start to die within minutes. This can lead to permanent brain damage, disability, or even death.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) notes that a stroke is sometimes called a “brain attack” but terminology aside, a stroke is a medical emergency that can threaten an individual’s ability to live long and lead healthy lifestyles.

BLACKS AT DISPROPORTIONATE RISK

In some Black communities, loose fodder incites a jolt of humor in the contrast that violence isn’t the biggest threat to Black lives—it’s table salt. There is an unfortunate truth in the latter and physicians have consistently warned against consuming unhealthy foods high in fat and sodium like smoked meats and fried chicken doused with hot sauce. Obesity, smoking, diabetes and refraining from being physically active are also stroke risks.

The National Stroke Association (NSA) reports the risk of Blacks having a first stroke is nearly twice as high compared to whites. Strokes occur earlier in life for Blacks compared to racial counterparts and Black stroke survivors are also more likely to die, become disabled and experience difficulties with daily living and activities.

High blood pressure is the top risk factor for stroke, and one in three Blacks not only suffer from disease but is less likely to have it under control than other ethnic and racial groups. Additionally, a record of previous strokes or transient ischemic attack (TIA, or “mini-stroke”) increases the disproportionate risk for Blacks as illustrated below:

- Overweight and obesity – almost 70% of Black men and over 80% of Black women are overweight or obese.
- Diabetes – Blacks are more likely to have diabetes than non-Hispanic whites.
- High cholesterol – nearly 30% of Black Americans have high levels of “bad” LDL cholesterol.
- Sickle cell anemia – this common genetic disorder in Blacks is a risk factor for stroke.



HEALTH EQUITY AND RACIAL DISPARITIES

HEADS UP is an acronym for Health Equity and Actionable Disparities in Stroke: Understanding and Problem Solving. In a 2020 multidisciplinary symposium held in Los Angeles, HEADS UP attendees placed a focused lens on racial and ethnic disparities in cerebrovascular disease with a goal to apply research toward the reduction of stroke disparities and identify positive health outcomes in racial minorities.

Some of the symposium’s final report summarized the following: “To achieve the goal of equity in the care of patients with or at risk for stroke, we need to identify and disseminate additional cost-effective interventions to further reduce racial/ethnic disparities, improve the control of stroke risk factors, increase stroke awareness, and improve access and quality of stroke care.”

Identified interventions included health insurance noting that copayment reductions have improved access to care for minority patients with or at risk for stroke; however, the persistence of racial/ethnic disparities in stroke health care and health across the United States still requires, “a need to train and mentor a new generation of stroke disparities researchers who can perform implementation science.”



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