

Ask the Pharmacist

Your pharmacist is the best (next to your doctor, of course) source of information on how to get the most from your medicines. He can also help clarify some of the medical 'tips' you receive from friends and/or the Internet.

STROKE AND MEDICINE FOR STROKE

Q: My grandfather had a stroke recently. I later read an email from a friend who said that in order to recognise if someone has suffered a stroke, one should ask the person to stick out his tongue. If the tongue is 'crooked' or goes to one side, then it is a stroke. Is this true? Also, what medication should be taken and is there a way to prevent a recurrence?

A: The question of sticking out the tongue is part of guidelines that have been circulating on the Internet for the past few months. The advice also appears in many discussion boards/forums of various stroke associations in the UK and US.

The purported guidelines recommend using the first three letters in the word 'stroke'; ie S, T and R and asking 3 simple questions:

- 1) S – Ask the individual to **smile**;
- 2) T – Ask the person to **talk** and say a simple sentence (coherently) eg "It is sunny out today";
- 3) R – Ask the person to **raise** both arms.

A stroke is like a brain attack. It happens when the blood supply to a part of the brain is cut off or reduced. A blockage for even a short period of time can cause brain damage or even death. There are basically 2 types of strokes:

- 1) Ischaemic stroke – a blockage in an artery
- 2) Haemorrhagic stroke – bleeding in the brain.

Warning signs of stroke are:

- Sudden numbness or weakness of the face, arm or

- leg, especially on one side of the body;
- Sudden confusion, trouble understanding or speaking;
- Sudden trouble seeing in one or both eyes;
- Sudden trouble walking, dizziness, loss of balance or coordination;
- Sudden, severe headache with no known cause.

Sometimes the symptoms will go away in about 15 minutes; suggesting a transient ischaemic attack (TIA) or mini stroke, which is a warning sign of an impending full-blown stroke. Treat this as a medical emergency.

Someone who has already suffered a stroke is more at risk of a repeat attack than someone who hasn't had a stroke. Thus, it is important to change your lifestyle and improve your health as well as control all your risks of stroke.

To reduce the risk:

- Follow your doctor's or pharmacist's advice on lifestyle changes (such as good nutrition, maintaining a healthy weight, exercising, not smoking and little alcohol);
- Control your blood pressure by taking medication (as prescribed by your doctor) and checking it regularly;
- Take any medication prescribed to help stop blood clotting or to reduce cholesterol, as well as to control other conditions such as heart disease, atrial fibrillation (irregular heartbeat) and diabetes.

Generally, aspirin is recommended to reduce the risk for stroke in patients with TIA and minor stroke. It is sometimes used for major strokes. Patients who do not respond to or tolerate aspirin will be prescribed with ticlopidine, which is more expensive. **OH!**