

Strokes striking younger patients, but where do they turn?

March 25 2011, By Linda Shrieves

When Kate Watts fell ill with pneumonia in both lungs last year, doctors at a hospital in Sebring, Fla., put her into a medically induced coma to help her recover.

But when she awoke four days later, the right side of her body was paralyzed. She'd had a stroke - and her prognosis, doctors said, was grim.

Beating that - and walking and talking again - has been hard, but Watts, who's now 34, wants something more. She wants to talk to someone else who's been through the same experiences, someone who understands what it feels like to be denied Social Security benefits or who knows how it feels to be left cooking, typing - even shaving your legs - with one good hand.

For that, Watts is turning to a bunch of strangers. They're all people under the age of 50 who've had a stroke - and they're forming a new support group under the guidance of a Florida Hospital therapist.

The group, which meets once a month at Florida Hospital, is part of a growing network of organizations reaching out to young stroke survivors.

A study released last month by the U.S. [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) found that the number of young Americans hospitalized for strokes has risen dramatically in recent years, while the number of elderly who've been hospitalized for strokes has been dropping. To examine the problem, government researchers compared the number of

stroke hospitalizations nationwide in 1994 and 1995 with the hospitalizations in 2006 and 2007.

The sharpest increase came among men ages 15 through 34, whose hospitalizations rose 51 percent in a decade. Stroke-related hospitalizations among women in that age group rose by 17 percent during the same period.

The CDC study echoed similar research done by Dr. Timothy Wolf of Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis. Wolf raised eyebrows in 2009 when he reported that 45 percent of the 7,740 patients who had been hospitalized for strokes at a St. Louis hospital were under age 65 - and nearly 27 percent were younger than 55.

"We had noticed this anecdotally before we did the research," Wolf said. "In our clinics, we were seeing more and more younger people - and more people who had mild strokes. They didn't have a lot of neurological issues that you associate with [stroke patients](#). They had cognitive issues and depression."

Although scientists aren't sure why strokes are becoming more common in young Americans, Wolf said many suspect that the nation's obesity epidemic plays a role.

"Diabetes, high blood pressure, obesity - the things that cause stroke are on the increase in the U.S.," he said.

Younger stroke victims, who Wolf classifies as anyone under age 55, need different types of support groups because they worry about different issues than older stroke patients, he said. For instance, while many older stroke patients are retired, younger patients agonize about how they'll support their families, how they'll go back to work - and how they can function in the real world when their brains don't seem to be

working right.

Those are the same issues that stroke rehabilitation specialists in Orlando have seen in young patients.

"They're concerned about getting back to providing for their families. They have kids who still need them, and they want to be a viable part of their upbringing," said Dr. Mitchell Freed, an Orlando physical medicine and rehabilitation specialist. "We see more psycho-social impact on younger patients - and there is a greater incidence of depression and adjustment issues in the younger stroke patients."

Typically, rehab specialists suggest that stroke patients join a "stroke club," which is devoted to helping stroke victims. But Karen Kalich, a recreation therapist at Florida Hospital, noticed that when she advised stroke patients in their 30s and 40s to attend support groups for stroke victims, most found themselves surrounded by senior citizens.

"Many of them didn't like it because the age group was older and what they did, the activities, was old-fashioned type stuff," Kalich said. "So I decided that we'd try to form one."

The club, which meets at Florida Hospital, aims to provide a chance for stroke victims, their spouses or family members to share notes and compare experiences. She wants the participants to choose their activities, such as going to the movies together, going bowling, or bringing in speakers to talk about topics that interest them.

For Watts, a former Orlando waitress who now lives with her sister in the Sebring area, the stroke support group will be only part of the solution.

She still can't use her right arm. And while she wants to go back to work,

she can't return to waitressing with only one good hand. She can't type either. And her brain is still recovering from the stroke, leaving her with emotional highs and lows, and some cognitive problems.

Rehab may help with those issues, but now she wants to reach out to other [stroke](#) patients her age.

"No one understands exactly what I'm going through because they haven't gone through it," Watts said. "There is a proverbial shoulder I can cry on, through social networks. But I want someone to hold me or hold my bad hand, and say 'Kate, you're going to make it. You're going to do this.' "

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