

Most women unable to identify signs of stroke

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Most women know to call 911 if they think they are having a stroke, according to a national survey by the American Heart Association of more than 1,200 women, recently published in the journal *Stroke*. But here's the catch: Most would not recognize the [signs of a stroke](#) if they actually had one.

About half of the surveyed [women](#) identified sudden weakness or numbness on one side of the body (including the face and limbs) as a sign of [stroke](#), while 44 percent identified speech difficulties (loss of or trouble talking or understanding speech). Fewer than 25 percent identified sudden and severe headache, unexplained dizziness, or sudden loss or dimming of vision in one eye. Moreover, 20 percent did not know

even one sign of a stroke.

More unexpected, perhaps, are the findings of another recent study, in *Diagnosis*, which analyzed medical records from over 1,000 hospitals in nine states. It found that even [emergency room doctors](#) miss many strokes in women, especially when women come in complaining of dizziness and headaches. Such symptoms were instead attributed to other conditions (such as a migraine or inner ear infection), or the women were given no diagnosis. Actually, the study found that strokes were commonly missed in men, too, but more often in women, as well as in [minority groups](#) and people under 45.

All of this is disturbing, since the earlier a stroke is recognized and treated the better the outcome (time loss equals brain loss). Stroke is the fourth leading cause of death in Americans and the third leading cause in women. And people who survive a stroke often have long-term disabilities that greatly diminish quality of life and increase health-care costs. More women than men suffer strokes, and the prevalence has been rising in younger women (in their 30s and 40s) in recent years. Strokes also affect minority groups more than whites.

To increase awareness, the American Heart Association is promoting the acronym FAST, which stands for Face drooping, Arm weakness, Speech difficulty, Time to call 911. Another helpful acronym is STR (as in stroke), which stands for three simple tests you can give to someone who you think is having a stroke: ask her to Smile, Talk (speak a sentence), and Raise both arms. If she has trouble with any of these, call for help, but keep in mind that many people having a stroke may pass this test.

Provided by University of California - Berkeley

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