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# Stroke of luck

**Many factors can lead to stroke, but treatments improving recovery**

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[Wes Varda](#) recalls noticing symptoms of what would result in a stroke a year before it actually happened.

In 2007, he began feeling dizzy, and it would get worse with seasonal allergies. After a really bad episode that sent him home from work, he consulted his doctor who diagnosed it as benign vertigo.

A year later, Varda had another dizzy spell, but this time, he lost voluntary control of his muscles. Realizing something was wrong, he called his father for help, and a few hours later, Varda's doctor was telling him he had a stroke. He was 31 at the time.

"I went for annual physicals and didn't have any health problems," he said. "I didn't drink or smoke and took care of myself."

Varda's story actually isn't uncommon. While most people associate strokes with older people, it turns out that there are just as many who have a stroke under the age of 65 as over the age, according to the **Georgia Hospital Association**.

Ford Vox, a doctor in the brain injury unit at the **Shepherd Center**, where Varda ended up, says the risk factors in younger patients are often more obvious, but less preventative, such as a spontaneous rupture of the artery or venous cerebral thrombosis. The latter often occurs in athletes, who develop a clot as a result of being dehydrated or under a period of high stress.

"We are also seeing more strokes occurring in younger patients due to an increase in obesity, diabetes and hypertension, especially now that lifestyles shift are more sedentary," Vox said.

Risk factors and warning signs are the same for men as they are in women, including high

blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes, obesity, tobacco and alcohol use — most of which can be modified, [Keith Sanders](#), medical director of Emory Saint Joseph's Stroke Center, said.

However, the frequency of stroke is higher in white and black men than women. Though the reason for that isn't known, Sanders said women are more apt to take responsibility for their health than men.

He described an **American Heart Association** public service announcement that featured a man walking around his office with an arrow in his head. His coworkers continuously ask if he needs help, but the man brushes it off, saying he will see about it tomorrow.

"The macho attitude has been to ignore it and go on," he added.

A few years ago, a study to determine public awareness of stroke symptoms found that over half of those surveyed could not name one symptom, and 30 percent of those in Atlanta couldn't name the part of the body where stroke happens, Sanders said.

Also, a group of southeastern states, Georgia included, are part of "The Stroke Belt," an area identified as having a two-fold increased risk of dying from a stroke, said [Sakib Qureshi](#), director of the stroke service at **Atlanta Medical Center**.

Doctors are trying to figure out why that is, and while there are some obvious risk factors such as higher rates of diabetes, it isn't all about that, he added.

African Americans, especially those aged 35 to 55, are 2 to 4 times more likely to die from a stroke than Caucasians, said [Aaron Anderson](#), assistant professor of neurology at the **Emory School of Medicine**, and a vascular neurologist at Grady's Marcus Stroke and Neuroscience Center.

"We think it stems from high blood pressure that goes untreated or improperly treated," he said.

As a result, local doctors are working to educate people on the warning signs, particularly because the treatments depend on time. The **National Stroke Association** has created the moniker "F.A.S.T.," which stands for facial drooping, arm weakness, speech difficulty and time to call 9-1-1.

Doctors typically have six hours after a stroke to administer treatment, or it becomes risky. There are two treatments being used today. One is an intravenous tissue plasminogen activator, often called the "clot-busting" drug, Anderson said. TPA was approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration in 1996.

"One in 3 will benefit from this treatment, not only going back home, but back to an

independent lifestyle or even back to work," he added.

For the past five years, Atlanta doctors have been leaders in performing thrombectomies, a procedure where doctors insert a catheter from the groin area to the brain to remove a blood clot, Anderson said.

Varda was able to have both the clot-busting drug and thrombectomy. He also later underwent surgery to repair a hole in his heart, which doctors say was most likely the cause of his stroke, he said.

The risk for a second stroke is high, so Varda is proactive in reducing that by taking a baby aspirin daily and exercising regularly.

Meanwhile, Anderson said Grady is part of a nationwide study to see if treatments can work beyond the six-hour window to 12 or even 24 hours later. He is also working on recovery.

"We are looking at how best to improve recovery beyond the stroke," he said. "Not everyone is qualified for the treatments, so we are considering other medicine, rehab and follow-up after a stroke."

### **Who is at risk for stroke?**

- Lifestyle: Nearly half of Americans possess at least one of the major risk factors for strokes, including high cholesterol, high blood pressure and smoking.
- Frequency: For every four people who have a stroke, one will have a second stroke. (Source: **CDC**)
- Race: The stroke risk for African Americans is twice as high as that of Caucasians. (Source: **National Institutes of Health**)
- Age: In Georgia, near the same number of people under the age of 65 have a stroke, 17,223, as those who are over the age of 65, 17,447. (Source: Georgia Hospital Association)

### **Other risk factors**

- Diet – Healthy eating can reduce the risk for chronic diseases.
- Physical activity – exercise for 30 minutes, three times a week. Excessive weight can lead to high cholesterol, high blood pressure and diabetes, all of which can increase stroke risk.
- Tobacco use and smoking
- Alcohol use
- Atrial fibrillation and circulation problems
- Carotid artery disease – narrowing of the two main blood vessels in the neck that supply blood to the brain.

*Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention/ National Institutes of Health/Georgia Hospital Association/National Stroke Association*

**Stroke warning signs**

**F**– Face drooping

**A**– Arm weakness

**S**– Speech difficulty

**T**– Time to call 911

*Source: StrokeAssociation.org*