

Immediate response to strokes is key to saving victim's lives

By Denise Adams

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The symptoms are sneaky. Suddenly it's difficult to think of the right word to say, and there's weakness or numbness on the face, arm or leg.

Most importantly, the changes occur rapidly.

"All of a sudden, you can't hold a glass or your speech is slurred and garbled and you don't know what to say," said Jan Flewelling, the Stroke Outreach Program Coordinator for The Methodist Hospital.

According to Flewelling, getting and receiving medication and emergency help quickly is the difference between regaining one's physical capabilities and losing them forever.

Flewelling is presenting seminars to school children, firefighters, emergency medical personnel and first responders in Fort Bend County on recognizing the symptoms of a stroke .

She particularly enjoys talking with the children as many of



Jan Flewelling from The Methodist Hospital speaks with Pecan Grove Volunteer Fire Department Chief Larry Perry about assisting patients with symptoms of a stroke. More than 50 percent of their calls are medical related. Shown is one of the medical kits the firefighters take on medical calls. (Staff photo by Denise Adams)

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them are spending extended time with grandparents after school. Fort Bend ISD has instituted a WATCH program, an acronym for weight, alcohol, tobacco, cholesterol and hypertension, the five preventable heart disease factors.

Flewelling calls the students her “stroke heroes,” as she explains how to get help as soon as possible and empower them to call 911.

She gives the youngsters rubber stroke balls that look like a brain to explain how the cranial arteries clog up and cause a stroke.

Flewelling also uses Microsoft Paint to illustrate how the blood races up the brain's arteries and then reaches a stopping point - the stroke. She changes the color of the paintbrush to black to illustrate that part of the brain was stopped from doing its job.

Flewelling makes the students promise to tell three adults what they learned that day. In that way, she's sure the children absorbed what she said.

EMTs and Firefighters

The first three hours are crucial for a stroke victim, and firefighters and emergency personnel are often the first ones on the scene. For these professionals, Flewelling stresses the importance of getting patients to a hospital.

Many people who call 911 try and tell the first responders they feel better and don't want to go to the hospital. Flewelling is adamant they get that person to a hospital as soon as possible.

In Fort Bend County, the three stroke-ready hospitals are OakBend Medical Center, Sugar Land Methodist and Memorial Hermann Hospital in Sugar Land.

Knowing the subtle signs of a stroke and calling ahead for treatment is one more way they can help patients lessen the effects.

“Strokes are the number one reason for long-term disability,” said Flewelling. Strokes are an expensive disability that include long-term physical, occupational and speech therapy, medications and hospital stays. The indirect costs include lost wages, both of the stroke victim and of the care givers.

Strokes aren't just for the elderly - Flewelling said people in their '20s can have strokes due to birth defects, and those with diabetes, circulatory or kidney problems pose three times greater risk.

Flewelling said 80 percent of strokes can be prevented by lowering one's blood pressure and cholesterol count and preventing diabetes through diet and exercise.

Many, but not all, stroke victims have signs of an impending stroke in that they experience TIAs - a transient ischemic attack - a warning stroke that produces stroke-like symptoms but no lasting damage.

If a person experiences a TIA, Flewelling is adamant they notify their physician as soon as possible and make changes in their lifestyles. Three to nine months later, that person will have another stroke. And that one could be deadly.

Everywhere Flewelling speaks, someone has a stroke story. Mostly, it is that someone brushes off the symptoms, thinking they have a bad headache or are catching a virus. Almost half of the people who die from a stroke do so because they went to take a nap until they felt better or did not seek medical help.

For information about strokes or scheduling a talk with Flewelling, contact her via e-mail at jflewelling@tmh.tmc.edu.

In March, over 65 campuses in FBISD are participating in "Watch Week," an acronym for Weight, Activity, Tobacco, Cholesterol and High Blood Pressure, the five preventable heart disease risk factors.

Students are encouraged to think "F.A.S.T." by learning the signs of a stroke:

€ Face: Does the face look uneven? Ask the person to smile.

€ Arms: Does one arm drift down? Ask the person to raise both arms.

€ Speech: Does their speech sound strange? Ask the person to repeat a simple phrase.

€ Time: Call 911 if any of the above symptoms are noticeable.

The week is sponsored by the Fort Bend County Medical Society Alliance, the Texas Medical Association Alliance and the Texas Medical Association Foundation.