

# Nurse Tip Sheet: Educating High-Risk Patients About Stroke

Stroke is treatable if caught immediately. It is important to help high-risk patients learn the signs, educate the people around them, and call 9-1-1 immediately if stroke is suspected.

## Foundational Education Points

- **Explain Stroke Risk:** Clearly explain to patients that they are at elevated risk for stroke and why (high blood pressure, diabetes, high cholesterol, smoking/tobacco, excessive alcohol, atrial fibrillation, heart disease, prior strokes/TIA, sedentary lifestyle, etc.).
- **Explain that Stroke Is Treatable:** Emphasize that stroke can cause severe disability or death, but immediate treatment can dramatically improve outcomes. Tell patients that stroke is a medical emergency and that treatment works best if given within hours. Encourage them not to “wait and see,” lie down, or hope symptoms improve.

## Recognizing Stroke

- **Teach the Stroke Warning Signs B.E.F.A.S.T.:** See Figure 1.
- Also mention sudden confusion, trouble walking, severe headache, and numbness.
- **Recognizing Stroke on a Phone Call:** Explain that strokes may be recognized during a phone call because of slurred speech, confusion, or unusual responses.
- If you think somebody is having a stroke, ask the person to smile, raise both arms, and repeat a sentence. You can even do this over the phone.
- Patients may also look in a mirror for facial drooping or arm weakness if they suddenly feel strange.
- They should call 9-1-1 immediately if symptoms are present.
- Be aware that stroke signs can be misunderstood in different cultural or linguistic contexts.

### Figure 1: B.E.F.A.S.T.

- **Balance** loss, trouble walking.
- **Eye** changes such as blurry vision or trouble seeing.
- **Face:** uneven smile or facial drooping.
- **Arm** weakness or numbness.
- **Speech** that is slurred, confused, or strange.
- **Time** to call 9-1-1 immediately.

## Immediate Actions

- **Emphasize That Most Stroke Patients Do Not Call 9-1-1 Themselves:** Explain that during a stroke, people are often confused, weak, or unable to speak clearly. Family, friends, coworkers, neighbors, caregivers, or even people on the phone are often the ones who recognize the stroke and call 9-1-1.
- **Encourage Education of Regular Contacts:** Ask patients who they regularly see or speak with in their life. Encourage patients to educate those people about stroke signs. Offer enough Stroke Smart wallet cards and magnets so the patient can give them to family, friends, caregivers, and other important contacts. Encourage them to place items on refrigerators, near phones, or in other visible locations.
- **Emergency Preparedness:** Discuss wearable emergency alert buttons or smart devices, especially for people who live alone. Encourage patients to keep an updated medication list, allergies, and emergency contacts easily accessible, as this may help emergency treatment decisions.
- **Critical Emergency Instructions:** If stroke symptoms occur, call 9-1-1 immediately and say, “I think I’m having a stroke.” Do not call the doctor first, go to urgent care, drive themselves, wait for symptoms to improve, or take aspirin or other medications unless instructed by emergency personnel.