The Link Between Migraine and Stroke

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Risk of Stroke in Migraine Sufferers

If you read my last article on craniosacral therapy, you'll know that at the age of 19, I was taken to the hospital by my aunt – a registered nurse – after exhibiting alarming symptoms. I woke up that morning and tried to find my alarm clock across the room. I was unable to focus my eyes. I felt pressure, but no pain.

Hoping to sleep it off and not thinking much of it at the time, I went back to bed. Two hours later, I awoke with severe pressure behind my eyes; my eyes were crossed and I couldn't uncross them. I literally crawled out of my bed and down the stairs with tears pouring down my face. I have this vague memory of crying to my younger sister, who was desperately trying to get a hold of my parents, about how no one would ever love me if my eyes stay crossed like this forever. #Priorities.

Eventually my sister called my aunt who rushed me to the ER where I was admitted almost immediately. As someone who was suffering from migraines on a fairly regular basis at that point, I knew that what I was experiencing was far different from the aura-filled, nausea-inducing migraines I was used to. I was put into a bed and after performing several neurological exams the ER doctor told me I was exhibiting signs of a minor stroke.

I had been on a new kind of oral contraceptive pill for five days at this point, which, according to the doctor, combined with being prone to migraines with aura, was a recipe for disaster.

Young female migraine sufferers who experience partial loss of vision during a migraine attack have a 25% increase in stroke risk over women who don't have migraines. That, combined with the increased risk of stroke by 24% for women who take oral contraceptive pills or other hormonal forms of birth control, basically meant my chances of having a stroke lay in the hands of a coin toss.

So why are young, female migraine sufferers at a greater risk of suffering from a stroke than non-migraine sufferers?

What is a Stroke?

Let's start with the basics. The sad truth is that doctors don't really know why they're related, just that they are. A stroke occurs when part of the brain is deprived of blood. While there are two different kinds of stroke, only one is suggested to be linked to migraines.

The first kind of stroke is referred to as a 'haemorrhagic stroke' – which, as the name suggests – occurs when a damaged artery bleeds into nearby tissue. This type of stroke has no relationship with migraines.

The second kind of stroke is called an 'ischaemic stroke' and is exacerbated by birth control pills, smoking, and – you guessed it! – migraines. 'Ischaemic' means a reduced blood and oxygen supply, typically due to a clot.

Next page: differentiating between migraine and stroke, and tips for stroke prevention.

Is it a Migraine or Stroke?

Now comes the fun part. Attempting to decipher your symptoms! As most of us are aware, migraine and stroke symptoms are annoyingly similar. With typical migraine symptoms consisting of:

- Auras
- Numbness or weakness – typically on one side of your body
- Extreme head pain
- Nausea/vomiting
- Dizziness/vertigo
- Trouble speaking or expressing coherent thoughts

And typical stroke symptoms consisting of:

- Trouble seeing with one or both eyes
- Numbness or weakness in your face, arm, or leg, especially on one side
- Severe headache that comes on for no reason
- Nausea/vomiting
- Dizziness
- Trouble speaking

Look at that! 6 for 6!

It's because of these commonalities that it's important to know your migraine warning signs and to take action if something seems abnormal. As previously stated, my migraines generally consist of numbness, nausea and vomiting, head pain, auras and deliriousness. So, when I experienced several of those symptoms but had difficulties focusing my eyes instead of my typical auras, I knew something wasn't right.

The Aftermath of a Stroke

For the most part, I was fortunate enough to fully recover from my 'mini stroke,' though five years later I still occasionally find myself stumbling over words or losing my train of thought – both things that anyone who knew me previous to this event would tell you are completely out of character. But, I was lucky. 25% of people fully recover after a stroke and 50% of people will have a disability. Some of these disabilities include:

- Inability to use your arms or walk. This is usually because of paralysis on one side of the body.
- Inability to speak, read or write. You may also not be able to understand what someone else is saying.
- Inability to think clearly. You may even act differently than you did prior to the stroke.
- Inability to feel. You may not be able to feel when someone touches an affected part of the body.
- In rare situations, sight or hearing may also be affected.

Preventing Stroke

If you are a young woman who suffers from migraines with aura and you are taking an oral contraceptive, know that your risk of stroke is increased. If you have a mother, father, or other close relative who has had a stroke, your risk of stroke is further increased.

While you can't necessarily put an end to your migraines, finding an alternative to oral contraceptives may be a place to start. While non-hormonal birth control options are a bit more challenging to find, they are out there.

Diaphragms, male and female condoms, Paraguard IUD (which utilizes copper as opposed to the hormonal version, Mirena), contraceptive sponges, Lea contraceptive, cervical caps, spermicide, and in more extreme

measures, tubal litigation or vasectomy are all non-hormonal forms of birth control (though it's important to note that these don't all decrease the risk of sexually transmitted infections).

Beyond that, some additional ways to decrease your risk of stroke with migraine include:

- Lowering your blood pressure
- Maintaining a healthy weight
- Exercising
- Minimizing alcohol intake
- Taking a baby aspirin
- Quitting smoking (or never starting)

Conclusion

Unfortunately for those of us who do suffer from migraines, our chances of stroke are significantly higher than those who do not suffer from migraines. While there isn't a universal 'fix' to control or stop our migraines (I wish!), we can take precautions and work to prevent stroke in the areas of our lives that we do have some control over.

Are you a migraine sufferer who has experienced a stroke? We would love to hear your story. You can submit it by filling out the form here.