



# WHAT IS A TIA?

## STROKE FACT SHEET S

You may have known someone who has had what was diagnosed as a little or mini stroke. They had similar symptoms to a stroke, but appeared to recover very quickly. The medical name for this is **transient ischaemic attack**, which can be defined like this:

**Transient:** Symptoms disappear in less than one day (24 hours)

**Ischaemic:** Failure of blood flow to part of the brain or eye

**Attack:** Sudden onset of symptoms which from person to person vary depending on which part of the brain or eye is starved of blood.

### **What is a transient ischaemic attack?**

Transient ischaemic attacks are often called TIAs or sometimes mini strokes. The symptoms are very similar to those of a stroke but they do not last nearly as long. In a TIA symptoms depend on which blood vessel to the brain is blocked and so which part of the brain is starved of blood. Common symptoms include brief attack of weakness, clumsiness, numbness or pins and needles of the face, arm or leg on one side of the body, slurring of speech or difficulty in finding words or, if blood vessels in the eye are affected, brief loss of vision in one or both eyes. TIAs do not usually cause 'blackouts', fainting or loss of consciousness.

### **Why is a diagnosis important?**

There are several illnesses which may give very similar symptoms to those of a TIA and require different treatments. These include migraine, epileptic fits or seizures, a low blood sugar, faints and changes in the heart rhythm. So it is important that people with any of the TIA symptoms should go to see their doctor to find out whether they have had a TIA or some other kind of attack.

### **Why are TIAs important?**

Although TIAs themselves may be frightening they do not cause any permanent damage. However, a person who has had a TIA has a greater risk of suffering a stroke. The risk of having a stroke in the first year after a TIA is about ten per cent but then falls by about five per cent each year.

A TIA is also a warning of an increased risk of a heart attack. TIAs and stroke are caused by narrowing and blockages of the blood vessels to the brain, whilst heart attacks are caused by narrowing and blockage of the blood vessels to the heart. Narrowing and blockage of blood vessels often affects several parts of the body and may be caused by smoking, high blood pressure, high cholesterol levels in the blood and diabetes.

**What treatment is available?**

The treatment depends on the results of a careful assessment by the doctor. Anybody who smokes should stop completely. People with high blood pressure, high cholesterol or high sugar levels in the blood can usually be helped by a healthier diet, though drugs are sometimes needed. A doctor may also prescribe aspirin to thin the blood; this reduces the risk of having a stroke or heart attack after a TIA by about 25 per cent. Sometimes TIAs are due to narrowing of a blood vessel in the neck; this can be treated by an operation called a carotid endarterectomy.

All of these treatments reduce the risk of a stroke or heart attack, but they are all more effective if started early after a TIA. Therefore, if anyone has an attack with symptoms similar to those described, it is important that they should see a doctor at once, so that if needed, the earliest possible treatment can be given.

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