

Support after stroke

Stroke. It's one of Australia's biggest killers and a leading cause of disability. According to The Stroke Foundation, one stroke occurs every nine minutes and the number of people living with the effects of stroke is predicted to climb to one million by 2050.

Stroke Foundation research indicates that 65 per cent of stroke survivors suffer a disability which impedes their ability to carry out daily living activities unassisted.

Services like those provided by the neurological team at Castlemaine Health offer invaluable support and treatment, helping people who have had a stroke to participate in home life and their community.

Bringing together the skills of speech pathologists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, dietitians, podiatrists, continence nurses and social workers, the neurological team at Castlemaine Health work with people at all ends of the spectrum; from those who have recently had a stroke right through to people who may have been living with the effects of a stroke for many years.

"People who engage with the service are in a life-changing space," says physiotherapist Kim Howlett.

"Their stroke may have taken them from being able-bodied and living a normal life

to suddenly having severe mobility and communication problems. Or they may just be feeling like things aren't quite right."

"We work to help them to set goals and then connect with the right services and therapist to help them reach those goals."

The program is entirely individual.

"Every person is different and every stroke is different, so it's unlikely two people will have the same path through rehabilitation and recovery," says speech pathologist Emma McLaughlin.

"Some people experience changes in concentration or memory which can make taking directions from therapists difficult in the early stages. Others go through periods of fatigue. We do the best we can to support them and keep them on track."

As a speech pathologist Emma works with people to manage communication difficulties, which can include articulation and clarity of speech, but can also extend to texting, using the internet or interpreting non-verbal communication. She can also help with swallowing.

"We use many of the same nerves, muscles and structures for speech and swallowing," says Emma.

"If people have problems with food going down the wrong way we can provide support to eat the things they like while reducing the risk of it making them unwell."

"If that's a meat pie and a beer at the footy, then we'll do what we can to help them enjoy it again," she says.

Physiotherapist Kim often helps survivors regain strength in an arm, or a leg, or regain hand function, but she can also work on balance and coordination, helping people learn to move again, which can be challenging if there is an acquired weakness on one side.

"It's about helping people get back to their lives, whether that's playing a sport they love like golf or bowls, moving more confidently through their home or lifting a glass during dinner, we focus on what is important to them," she says.

Both specialists encourage everyone in the community to manage the risk factors associated with stroke and maintain a healthy lifestyle.

Eating well, doing some sort of exercise most days of the week, avoiding smoking and heavy consumption of alcohol will all help reduce the risk. So will visiting a GP to talk about strategies to manage blood pressure, type 2 diabetes and atrial fibrillation (irregular heart beat).

Stress management is also really important says Kim.

"Doing things that make us feel relaxed and happy is so good for us. Feeling stressed and anxious brings the blood pressure and the risk of stroke up."

If you or someone you know has had a stroke, speaking to your GP about a referral to the neurological team at Castlemaine Health is a great step towards recovery.

"Symptoms of stroke can really affect people's quality of life," says Emma.

"You may think there's nothing that can be done, but very often there is. We'd encourage people to come and meet with us, have a chat, even if you can't quite put your finger on what's not right, and let us see if we can find a way to help."



Castlemaine Health physiotherapist Kim Howlett and speech pathologist Emma McLaughlin.

Q&A

Q: What causes a stroke?

A: A stroke occurs when the supply of oxygenated blood to the brain is interrupted. This can either be caused by a blockage in one of the blood vessels that feeds the brain, or a haemorrhage, where blood goes out the side of the vessel instead of where it's supposed to go. The longer the brain is without oxygen the more likely a person is to suffer permanent damage.

Q: What is a TIA?

A: A TIA (Transient Ischemic Attack) is often called a mini-stroke. During a TIA the blood supply to the brain is blocked temporarily. The signs are the same as for a stroke, but they disappear quickly, sometimes within a few minutes. It is a warning that you may have a stroke. It's also an opportunity to engage with your GP and support services to reduce the risk of this happening.

Q: What should I do if I think someone is having a stroke?

A: Act fast. One of the most effective treatments for stroke is to get to hospital quickly, within a couple of hours if possible. New medical treatments can clear or dissolve blockages and restore blood flow but if the stroke has happened more than a few hours ago administering them can be too dangerous. If you suspect someone might be having a stroke, ring 000 and say you think someone is having a stroke.

— Recognise —
STROKE
Think **F.A.S.T.**

F Has their **FACE** drooped?

A Can they lift both **ARMS**?

S Is their **SPEECH** slurred and do they understand you?

T Call 000, **TIME** is critical

If you see any of these symptoms **Act FAST call 000**

Stroke FOUNDATION

If you or someone you know is suffering from the effects of stroke speak to your GP about a referral to the neurological team or call the Community Rehabilitation Centre at Castlemaine Health on 5471 3575 for more information.