

BE KNOWLEDGEABLE OF CHRONIC CONDITIONS

Complications In Emergency Treatment

The more a doctor can find out about a patient in the first critical minutes in the emergency room, the better the chance that needless pain or injury can be averted.

Leading emergency physicians have identified 55 conditions, from angina to X-ray dye sensitivity, that can create serious problems if not communicated in the emergency room. For seniors, four of the most common are:

■High blood pressure. Forty percent of Americans over age 65 have high blood pressure. Even when controlled with drugs, the condition can suddenly worsen, creating a medical emergency. Medications that lower blood pressure can create a confusing picture for emergency rescue workers or emergency room doctors trying to diagnose a patient's condition.

■Diabetes. One in 10 Americans 65 and older suffers from diabetes mellitus, an inability to metabolize carbohydrates and sugar. Some people with diabetes experience unpredictable drops in blood sugar which can produce insulin shock. Insulin shock can be mistaken for drug or alcohol abuse, head injury or stroke. Disoriented, unconscious or even in a coma, patients may not be able to tell emergency room personnel about their condition.

■Heart disease. Chronic heart conditions, which affect 28 percent of persons 65 and over, cause many medical

emergencies. But often patients are in so much pain or so disoriented they cannot provide the necessary information about their heart conditions to emergency workers. This information is critical; for example, it can help doctors tell the difference between an angina episode or a heart attack.

■Multiple medications. More than 90 percent of older Americans take at least one prescription medication. Many take more. In the stress of an emergency, they may not remember them all. Many of the drugs used to treat heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes and other chronic conditions common among the elderly can interfere with medications frequently used in the emergency room.



The emergency identification service offered by the nonprofit Medic Alert Foundation International can help make sure that doctors get the potentially life-saving information they need. The Medic Alert emblem, worn as a bracelet or neck chain, lists a person's medical conditions, medications, I.D. number and Medic Alert's 24-hour emergency hotline number. Through

that number, medical personnel can quickly access medical records and medication usage, thus speeding proper diagnosis and treatment.

Lifetime Medic Alert membership costs just \$30. For a free brochure, call Medic Alert's toll-free number, 1-800-432-5378, or write Medic Alert Foundation, 2323 Colorado Ave., Turlock, CA 95380.

There's Good News About Stroke Prevention

Most strokes can be prevented. That's good news for the half million people who might otherwise have strokes this year. But the bad news is, few Americans know how to avoid them.

To raise awareness, the National Stroke Association is trying to educate the public about risk factors. Especially important is recognition of early warning signs of a TIA—a transient ischemic attack or "brain attack" in which a sudden blockage temporarily shuts off blood flow to an area of the brain.

Just as angina or chest pain is a signal that the heart is at risk for heart attack, the distressed brain sometimes gives off warnings, in the form of a TIA, when its arteries become clogged or narrowed, and there is risk of stroke.

What Are the Signs?

A TIA is over in minutes or hours. But in about 20 percent of untreated cases, a stroke occurs within one month; in 50 percent, within a year, according to the American Heart Association. And the stroke may produce severe disability, loss of speech, paralysis or memory impairment. Here's what to look for:

■Sudden blurred or decreased vision in one or both eyes.

■Sudden numbness, weakness or paralysis of the face, or in an upper or lower limb, occurring on one or both sides of the body.

■Difficulty speaking or understanding.

■Dizziness, loss of balance or an unexplained fall.

■Difficulty swallowing.

■Headache (usually severe and sudden), or an unexplained change in the pattern of headaches.

Today, there's more incentive to get prompt medical attention after a TIA. New medical breakthroughs, announced at a recent International Symposium on Stroke Prevention held at the New York University Medical Center, include:

■An experimental drug, ticlopidine, not yet approved by the Food and Drug Administration, was found to be almost 50 percent more effective than aspirin during the first year following a TIA.

■A surgical procedure known as

carotid endarterectomy — cleaning out the arteries in the neck leading to the brain. The procedure is extremely effective in preventing stroke in high-risk patients whose arteries are severely narrowed.

"Stroke is called America's most neglected disease," said Gary Houser, vice president of the National Stroke Association. "We hope to help people prevent damage rather than learn to live with it."

For further information and a free brochure, call or write the National Stroke Association, 300 E. Hampden Ave., Suite 240, Englewood, CO 80110-2622, or call 1-800-787-6537 (1-800-STROKES).



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