

SCRIPT – PRINT - No Time to Waste

Don't ignore heart and stroke symptoms during a pandemic

While everyone has been paying extra attention to the COVID-19 pandemic and taking care to stay home and away from others, that may not always be the best solution when it comes to potential health emergencies. For those people who have a history of heart and stroke issues, it's equally important to pay attention to your other health concerns, especially if you are currently experiencing any symptoms.

“I think it's healthy and okay to have some concerns about being exposed to COVID-19,” said Dr. Asad Shaikh, OSF HealthCare interventional cardiologist. “However, it shouldn't be to the point that it's going to impair your health when it comes to other medical problems that you might have. There are few things that can be more urgent than COVID-19, but having heart issues or a heart attack, etc. is one of those. If you do have fears or concerns, I think it's important to talk to your doctor and if you do have symptoms consistent with having a heart attack, it's better to be safe than sorry and get it checked out.”

Classic heart attack symptoms include chest pain during exertion which can be accompanied by shortness of breath, sweating and nausea. Dr. Shaikh said typically the pain will start in your chest and radiate into your left arm or jaw. And that, he says, can mean the difference between life and death.

“The biggest concern is you may have long-term effects,” said Dr. Asad Shaikh, OSF HealthCare interventional cardiologist. “Heart attacks, for example, can be fatal relatively quickly. Having fear of COVID-19, when healthy, takes some time to show damaging effects. However, when you have a heart attack or an unstable heart rhythm that's something we need to see and treat relatively quickly. For those reasons alone, it's important to have patients come in and get checked out. And we'd rather have someone come in and get checked out and be okay as opposed to the alternative.”

Hospitals and other health care facilities have gone to great lengths to protect all patients during their medical appointments and hospital stays, including following CDC guidelines.

“My best advice is if you have any concern you should come and get checked out,” said Dr. Asad Shaikh, OSF HealthCare interventional cardiologist. “At the hospital and at all of our facilities, we have the ability and we are separating those who

have infection of COVID or have a high risk of having COVID versus the patients who are having other medical issues, for example a heart attack. We are separating everyone out and keeping distancing from those folks as well. So if you have any concern, it's better to be safe than sorry and get checked out."

The same advice goes for patients who may be experiencing symptoms of stroke -- such as sudden weakness, numbness or confusion. Patients who have a history of stroke also have a greater risk of additional strokes who need to pay attention to any new developments. When in doubt, call 911 immediately.

"Even a numbness or a little dizziness could be a sign of a much bigger stroke if we don't implement our treatment right away if we don't find out the cause and treat the cause," said Dr. Akram Shhadeh, OSF HealthCare Saint Anthony Medical Center vascular & interventional neurology, neuro-critical care physician. "This cannot be treated in a relaxed fashion. This should be done in our emergency room because we are able to get all the necessary tests and results right away and implement the right treatment right away. If someone has symptoms of stroke even if it's mild, they have a very high risk of having more symptoms or a new stroke in the following day or two or even in a few hours if we don't implement the right treatment right away. And that does not happen except in a stroke center or emergency room with a full stroke team like ours on duty 24/7."

The key is to remember BEFAST

- **B**alance – Watch for a sudden loss of balance.
- **E**yes – Is there a sudden loss of vision in one or both eyes? Or double vision?
- **F**ace – Ask the person to smile and check to see if one side of the face droops.
- **A**rm – Ask the person to raise both arms and see if one arm drifts downward.
- **S**peech – Ask the person to repeat a simple sentence, and check to see if words are slurred or the sentence is repeated incorrectly.
- **T**ime – If a person shows any of these symptoms, it is important to get to the hospital as quickly as possible, and immediately call 911.

"I say don't gamble with your brain and with your life," said Dr. Akram Shhadeh, OSF HealthCare Saint Anthony Medical Center vascular & interventional neurology, neuro-critical care physician. "It's better to get checked by a stroke team in an emergency room than to be sorry later on because you did not seek

medical attention. Stroke is a time sensitive disease. If you don't show up on time, not only do you lose the chance of reversing the symptoms, but you lose the chance of preventing more strokes as soon as possible."