

Know the warning signs for a stroke

Eddie Anderson of Lawton, OK Branch 1123 was by all indications a healthy, fit letter carrier with no history of heart problems or high blood pressure when, sitting in his parked LLV on his route on a warm afternoon in May of 2016, he felt something go wrong.



Eddie Anderson

He was able to move his left foot, but not his right. As Anderson looked down at his right side to see if he could figure out what was going on, his right arm dropped and remained limp. “I knew something was wrong,” he said. “It was a scary situation.”

Anderson called his wife on his cell phone, but he couldn’t talk. “She said, ‘Eddie? Eddie?’ and I couldn’t answer. All I could do was cry,” he said.

Unable to walk, call for help or speak on the phone, he sat helpless in his truck. Postal supervisors noticed that his scanner indicated he wasn’t moving, so they dispatched carriers on nearby routes to check on him. The responding carriers reported that they had found Anderson mumbling and not making eye contact. Soon Anderson was rushed to the hospital, where he learned he had a stroke.

In the United States, a stroke occurs about every 40 seconds—nearly 800,000 people experience a stroke each year. It’s the fifth-largest cause of death and the No. 1 cause of adult disability.

A stroke is a “brain attack.” It is caused by failure of blood to reach part of the brain, either due to a blood clot blocking an artery or to an artery wall that weakens or breaks open. The

part of the brain that loses blood flow begins to die due to lack of oxygen, resulting in physical and mental symptoms that can include loss of memory or ability to speak, confusion, loss of balance or partial paralysis.

How a person is affected by a stroke depends on where the stroke occurs in the brain and the extent to which the brain is damaged. The symptoms may either go away after treatment or remain permanent. Because the brain is divided into two halves that control opposite sides of the body, a stroke often involves loss of motor control on just one side, as Anderson experienced.

A loss of mental capacity almost always comes with a stroke, but Anderson said he never lost the ability to understand people who were talking to him and what was happening on that day, even though he couldn’t speak.

As Anderson’s experience shows, a stroke can happen without warning, even in people who have no known risk factors. The sooner a stroke is identified and treated, the greater the chances of avoiding death or permanent disability.

According to the National Stroke Association (NSA), these are the warning signs that someone may be experiencing a stroke:

- Sudden numbness or weakness of face, arm or leg, especially on one side of the body
- Sudden confusion, trouble speaking or understanding
- Sudden trouble seeing in one or both eyes
- Sudden trouble walking, dizziness or loss of balance or coordination
- Sudden severe headache with no known cause

The NSA recommends “Act FAST” as an easy way to remember stroke warning signs and assess whether someone could be having one:

- F Face:** Ask the person to smile. Does one side of the face droop?
- A Arms:** Ask the person to raise both arms. Does one arm drift downward?
- S Speech:** Ask the person to repeat a simple phrase. Is their speech slurred or strange?
- T Time:** If you observe any of these signs, call 911 immediately.

It’s important to note the time of the first symptom to relay this information to medical personnel, because it can affect treatment decisions.

A postal supervisor initially thought Anderson might have heat stroke, which can mimic some of the symptoms of stroke, hence its name. In fact, however, they are different. The hallmark symptom of heat stroke is a body temperature above 104 degrees, but fainting may be the first sign. Other symptoms of heat stroke can include headache, dizziness, lack of sweat despite the heat, muscle weakness or cramps, nausea and vomiting, rapid heartbeat, and rapid, shallow breathing and disorientation.

Most strokes strike out of the blue, but sometimes “mini-strokes” occur days or weeks before a major one—and can be early warning signs. Looking back, Anderson thinks he may have experienced one a few weeks earlier.

“I was walking to a house and I felt my balance move to the right,” he said. “It lasted about five seconds, but before I got to the door, it was gone. I didn’t think anything about it, but I think that’s one thing that carriers need to understand—if that happens to anyone, they need to get to a doctor about it.”

Strokes can affect anyone, but several risk factors are associated with them. Lifestyle issues such as obesity, lack of exercise, smoking or drinking can bring greater risk. People with medical conditions such as high blood pressure, irregular heartbeat, high cholesterol, diabetes or circulation problems are at higher risk. Age, race or ethnicity, sex and family history may also play a role.

Having carried the mail since 1978, Anderson is well-known along his route, and after his stroke, his customers showered him with get-well cards, flowers and letters. Even now, they check on him to make sure he is all right if he sits in his truck for more than a few minutes.

Anderson quickly recovered from his stroke—after two nights in a hospital bed, he was walking again and went home. His recovery was so surprising, he said, that he made a young doctor cry, because most stroke victims leave more incapacitated than he did—and sometimes they don't survive.

With the help of physical therapy, Anderson regained his ability to walk normally and worked his way back to resuming his post office duties. By July, he was back to casing mail a few hours a day. A month later, he was carrying mail about four hours a day, and he returned to his route full time in December.

Anderson has advice for his fellow letter carriers to help them avoid a stroke. Along with staying hydrated, he said, "Take it easy. You don't have to be in a hurry. If something strange is happening, if you start feeling some changes, go see your doctor. Try to stay in shape, watch what you eat, and take care of yourself, because you're the only one who can do that." **PR**

Recognizing a Stroke

A guide to better understand stroke warning signs and symptoms

Act **FAST** and call 911 immediately

F

Face Drooping

- Does one side of the face droop or is it numb?
- Ask the person to smile. Is the person's smile uneven?

A

Arm Weakness

- Is one arm weak or numb?
- Ask the person to raise both arms. Does one arm drift downward?

S

Speech Difficulty

- Is speech slurred?
- Is the person unable to speak or hard to understand?
- Ask the person to say a simple sentence. Is the sentence repeated correctly?

T

Time to call 911

- If someone shows any of these symptoms, even if they go away, call 911.
- Note the time when the first symptoms appeared.



Stroke treatment that begins within **two hours** of the first symptoms reduces long term health effect and increases chance of survival.

Other Symptoms You Should Know:

- Sudden **Numbness** or weakness of face, arm or leg, especially on one side of the body
- Sudden **Confusion**, trouble speaking or understanding speech
- Sudden **Trouble Seeing** in one or both eyes
- Sudden **Trouble Walking**, dizziness, loss of balance or coordination
- Sudden **Severe Headache** with no known cause