

# 'Low public awareness of stroke worrying'

By Lillian N. Magezi

A recent study to determine risk factors for stroke among urban and rural populations of Wakiso district, it was discovered that participants did not know much about the condition. The study, conducted by physicians Jane Nakibuuka Malagala and James Kayima, involved 5,481 participants from Wakiso district (4,025 from urban areas and 1,458 from rural areas). The results that were recently launched at La Grande Hotel in Bwaise, Kampala showed only a quarter of the participants had heard about stroke. Furthermore, three quarters did not know that the brain was involved and only a quarter knew the risk factors.

The study also discovered that only a quarter of the participants knew the signs and symptoms of stroke, two thirds said they were not concerned about having a stroke and two-fifths of the respondents said they were not at risk of getting stroke.

Results from the study reflect what Dr Martin Kaddumukasa, a neurologist at Mulago Hospital, disclosed at the Uganda Heart Association conference at Hotel Africana in Kampala recently. Dr Kaddumukasa identified poor public awareness of stroke as one of the hindrances to patients seeking early treatment and adapting health-promoting behaviour, to prevent the condition. He noted that a stroke is the third most common cause of death worldwide, although the prevalence in Uganda has not yet been established.

### What is a stroke?

A stroke occurs when there is an interruption of blood supply to the brain, explains Dr Nakibuuka, a consultant physician. She says the heart and the brain share blood vessels, which supply glucose, oxygen and other nutrients that the brain needs to function. She adds that an interruption of blood supply to the brain can be caused by a clot, bursting/rupturing of a blood vessel due to high blood pressure or a blockage in the vessels due to fat deposits.

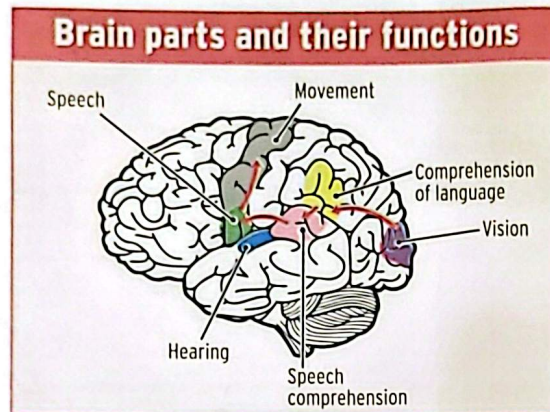
### Warning signs and symptoms

Presenting a paper about the risk factors for stroke among urban and rural populations in Wakiso district recently, Nakibuuka noted that different parts of the brain are responsible for different functions of the body, such as speech, movement, vision and language comprehension. Therefore, when one suffers a stroke, one loses the function that the affected part of the brain controls. It means

Symptoms of a stroke include drooping and numbness or weakness of face, arm or leg on one side of the body



Prevent stress through seeking psychosocial counselling. It could help you prevent getting a stroke



people who suffer stroke present with different symptoms. However, what should be emphasised is that the symptoms present suddenly.

They include face drooping and numbness or weakness of face, arm or leg on one side of the body. They also include difficulty in movement

and speech or understanding. Other symptoms are severe headache, confusion and blurred vision.

### Act fast

According to Kaddumukasa, many stroke patients in Uganda end up suffering a lot of damage, disability

and death because they are taken to hospital when it is too late, usually after between four to seven days. In addition only 3% get checked with a CT scan within the first day.

He advises that a stroke should be treated as a medical emergency and encourages family members and caregivers to immediately seek medical care as soon as they suspect that someone has suffered a stroke basing on the signs and symptoms. Kaddumukasa adds that seeking medical care early will enable patients benefit from effective treatment options, which can only be beneficial if done within a short time (about three hours) after the onset of a stroke.

Nakibuuka explains that after a stroke, one's brain cells begin to die and if one delays to seek medical help, their brain gets severely damaged, which can cause disability and even death.

Treatment for stroke patients involves handling the risk factor such as high blood pressure. Another treatment option is physiotherapy to rehabilitate the stroke patient.

### Risk factors

Nakibuuka and Dr Kayima, a cardiologist at Mulago Hospital note that risk factors for developing a stroke

are grouped into three categories. These are: non-modifiable risk factors (those one can do nothing about); modifiable risk factors (those one can prevent) and emerging risk factors (those that have started coming up in recent times).

### Non-modifiable risk factors

**Age**  
One's risk of getting a stroke increases as one becomes older. Kaddumukasa discloses that in Uganda the most affected age group are those between 45 to 65 years. However, he notes that this is a relatively young age group compared to the 75 years in developed countries.

### Gender

According to the American Stroke Association, more women get a stroke than men. Factors that may increase stroke risks for women include pregnancy, history of preeclampsia/eclampsia or gestational diabetes, oral contraceptive use (especially when combined with smoking) and post-menopausal hormone therapy.

- Family history of stroke
- Family history of early onset of heart disease, for example at 40 years
- Previous history of stroke

### Modifiable risk factors

● Hypertension (high blood pressure): Kayima says high blood pressure is the commonest risk factor for developing a stroke. According to Kaddumukasa, hypertension is responsible for 62% of stroke.

- Over consumption of alcohol
- Being overweight or obese and having fat around the abdomen
- Leading a sedentary lifestyle without enough physical activity
- Smoking (both active and passive)
- Diabetes

### Emerging risk factors

- HIV/AIDS
- Stress
- Sickle cell disease: This is a blood disorder which causes clogging of blood vessels disrupting blood flow. If blood flow to the brain is interrupted, one suffers a stroke.
- Low socio-economic status; Research has shown that people of a low social economic status are more vulnerable to suffering a stroke.

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## Prevention: Treat and manage chronic conditions

According to Jane Nakibuuka Malagala, a physician at Mulago Hospital, the risk of developing lifestyle diseases such as high blood pressure, diabetes and stroke can be reduced by 80% if one ensured the following:

- Do not start unhealthy lifestyles such as drinking

alcohol and smoking

- If you are already engaged in unhealthy behaviour, make positive changes
- Monitor and evaluate changes in your health and seek help where necessary

Nakibuuka says lifestyle risk factors can be controlled by:

- Limiting alcohol consumption (one bottle

a day)

- Exercising for at least 30 minutes every day.
- Going for regular medical check-ups, especially for blood pressure and sugar levels, as advised by a doctor
- Treat and manage chronic conditions, such as hypertension and diabetes
- Eating right to fight

obesity. A healthy plate of food consists of vegetables, proteins, carbohydrates and fruit. Use as little salt in your food as possible, eat little fat.

- Prevent stress through seeking psychosocial counselling, slow down, enjoy life and relax.