

Struck by a stroke at 24

Although an older person's risk of suffering from the condition is higher, younger people are not immune to it either



Venessa Lee

A 36-year-old Singaporean businesswoman's recent death from a stroke while on a business trip in Hong Kong has shone the spotlight on a condition that strikes mostly older people.

The median age of stroke patients admitted to public hospitals in Singapore is 67 years old, according to statistics from the National Registry of Diseases Office.

Although being older is a risk factor for stroke, younger victims may have more unusual causes of stroke, says Dr Ho King Hee, a neurologist at Gleneagles Hospital Singapore. These include congenital heart disease, tears in blood vessels, autoimmune diseases with inflammation of the blood vessels such as lupus or a congenital tendency for blood to clot more easily than normal.

For some women, pregnancy can increase the risk of stroke. They may experience blood coagulation changes or develop high blood pressure during pregnancy, which may predispose them to stroke, adds Dr Ho.

In certain specific circumstances, contraception may be a risk factor for stroke, says Dr N.V. Ramani, a neurologist at Raffles Neuroscience Centre, Raffles Hospital.

Younger women who smoke and have migraine with aura – which is a headache that strikes after or along with sensory disturbances including flashes of light, blind spots or tingling in one's hand or face – may get a stroke if they are taking some types of contraceptive pills, says Dr Ramani, an executive committee member of the Singapore National Stroke Association (SNSA), whose services for stroke survivors and their families include befriending activities and social integration programmes.

According to national figures from 2005 to 2014, males were generally affected more than females, with the incidence rate for stroke being 1.7 times higher in males.

For most strokes, a clot blocks blood supply to the brain. Patients often experience symptoms such as garbled speech, a drooping face and the inability to lift their arms. Possible long-term side effects of a stroke, especially when treatment is not prompt, include speech and memory problems, paralysis and some vision loss.

To reduce the risk of stroke, Dr Ramani advises regular medical check-ups for blood pressure and cholesterol, a healthy diet, regular exercise, moderate intake of alcohol and no smoking.



Madam Ho Yan Yan looks after her daughter, Ms Yvonne Lee (both right), with her domestic helper. ST PHOTO: VENESSA LEE

Vomited and fainted in taxi

In 2010, Ms Yvonne Lee had just returned to Singapore after completing her bachelor's degree in psychiatry at Australia's Curtin University.

A cheerful young woman, she wanted to help others by working as a psychiatrist.

While in a taxi one day, she started vomiting, then fainted. The taxi driver took her to National University Hospital. She had just suffered a stroke at the age of 24, robbing her of her speech, mobility and a promising future.

Today, Ms Lee, 30, has regained some mobility and cognitive function, but she cannot speak properly or walk unsupported.

She had received treatment in hospital for two years, before undergoing rehabilitation. Since April, she has been going at least twice a week to the charity, Able (Abilities Beyond Limitations and Expectations), which serves physically disabled people, for physiotherapy and occupational therapy. This is on top of the daily strengthening exercises she does at home.

She can feed herself, but requires help for daily tasks such as showering and putting on her shoes.

Her mother, Madam Ho Yan Yan, a single parent, looks after her with the family's domestic helper.

The 60-year-old businesswoman is stoic about her only child's condition. She says: "As parents, we constantly do our best for our children, but it is exhausting. Even going out can be difficult. We have to help her put on her shoes."