

Finding out more about our grey matter

The Health Column

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The human brain is one of the least understood, but most studied, organs of our body. At just 2% of our body weight it punches way above its weight and consumes 20% of our oxygen intake.

It used to be thought that the older we got, the slower our brain became and the slower we were. But now scientists believe the brains of older people only appear to slow down because they have so much information to compute, much like a full-up hard drive.

Learning more about the brain is the aim of Brain Awareness Week which is held every March. Brain Awareness Week unites the efforts of partner organisations worldwide in a celebration of the brain for people of all ages. Events include open days at neuroscience labs; exhibitions about the brain; lectures on brain-related topics; displays at libraries and community centres; classroom workshops; and more.

The idea is that the more we study the brain, the more we learn about it as the latest research into older people has shown.

The most recent study published in the Journal of Topics in Cognitive Science and reported in Britain's Telegraph newspaper, shows older people do not decline mentally with age, it just takes them longer to recall facts because they have more information in their brains.

This sort of research can help in identifying risk factors for stroke sufferers and perhaps long-term helping to reduce the incidence of strokes.

Stroke (also called a cerebrovascular accident) is the death of brain tissue resulting from lack of blood flow and insufficient oxygen to the brain. Another type of stroke (a cerebral haemorrhage) is caused by bleeding into brain tissue.

There can be a number of signs of a stroke and can be any one or combination of weakness or numbness, or paralysis – in the face, arm or leg; difficulty speaking or understanding; dizziness; sudden loss of vision; sudden and severe headache; difficulty swallowing.



Photo by Julia Freeman | sxc.hu

These signs may last only a few minutes but may last for several hours (called a transient ischaemic attack – TIA). They are often a warning of an impending stroke and must never be ignored.

Stroke is a medical emergency. If you experience the signs of stroke or see them in someone else, seek immediate medical attention. Prompt action can prevent further damage to the brain and help someone make a better recovery.

The risk of stroke is influenced by a number of factors: as we get older the risk is greater; men suffer stroke more often than women; and family history of stroke puts us more at risk. Studies like the one above about brain functions in older people help us learn more about the brain and all its aspects, including perhaps hints as to how strokes occur.

Regardless of this knowledge, we do know there are some simple lifestyle changes we can make which will reduce the risk of stroke and reduce the risk of heart disease, as well.

Two major contributing factors to strokes are high blood pressure and high blood cholesterol levels. Luckily blood pressure and cholesterol levels can be managed through diet and exercise or by the use of medicines.

Of course, there are other factors which can greatly add to the likelihood of you having a stroke – smoking, being overweight, having uncontrolled diabetes or having an irregular pulse (known as atrial fibrillation or AF).

So Brain Awareness Week is a good opportunity for us to take a step back and think about our brain and looking after it, as well as thinking about issues such as stroke which can have such a devastating impact on this vital organ.

For more advice about treating and preventing stroke, check out the Stroke Foundation website at www.strokefoundation.com.au or pick up a fact card from one of the 2000 pharmacies around Australia providing the Pharmaceutical Society's Self Care health information. For the nearest location log on to www.psa.org.au and click on Self Care Pharmacy Finder or phone 1300 369 772.