

# A Brush

# with Stroke

healthy living  
By Kirstin Gurmendi, Rock  
Creek resident

The week before Thanksgiving, 40-year-old Rock Creek resident Nate Carlson was on his way home from a particularly stressful day at work when suddenly he couldn't speak. "I was returning a call to a friend; when he answered, I couldn't say hello," says Nate. "It was the oddest thing because everything else felt fine, I just couldn't get any words out."

The father of three made his way home, and by that time, the problem had resolved itself. Nate chalked the experience up to stress. "I, however, wasn't going to let this go that easily," says wife Tara. "Loss of speech isn't a symptom of stress. I knew my husband likely had a stroke and despite his displeasure, I insisted we visit his primary care physician - and good thing because what we discovered changed everything." Lots of medical tests later the Carlsons

learned not only did Nate have a mini-stroke, but it was a small hole in his heart that caused it.

Dr. Lauren Middleton is a neurologist with Rock Creek's community hospital, Avista Adventist, and says, "People often assume a stroke presents with a crushing headache or loss of consciousness, but that's not always the case." Nearly 90 percent of strokes result from a blockage (typically a clot) in a blood vessel that supplies blood and oxygen to the brain - an ischemic stroke. "Only about 30 percent of people with ischemic strokes will have a headache, so it's not a reliable symptom," the doctor advises. The most common symptoms of stroke

include double vision, numbness or weakness on one side, lack of coordination, or inability to speak. "Even if your symptoms may be minor or resolve quickly, it could still be a stroke, and you should still seek emergency medical attention," Dr. Middleton insists since strokes can worsen without medical care. Any blockage that resolves itself before causing permanent damage, as happened for Nate Carlson, is called a Transient Ischemic Attack (TIA), or what some people refer to as a mini-stroke. "It's important to quickly check in with a doctor for every symptom of stroke, even if they're mild," Dr. Middleton continues. "The brain is our main circuit-board; anything that disrupts its' function influences the entire body. When we catch strokes early, we have a host of great interventional treatment options. Don't wait. Get to your ER as quickly as possible, and call 911," Dr. Middleton concludes.

Most strokes are the result of medical and vascular issues, such as high blood pressure, diabetes, high cholesterol, smoking, and obesity - none of which were an issue for Nate. "But stress was, and that's something else we're addressing," Tara says. In fact, recent studies suggest living with chronic stress increases stroke risk almost four-fold. "We

are now putting a priority on carving out time to decompress each day, and spending more time enjoying ourselves and our family," she adds. In the spirit of helping others learn from their experience, particularly with May being Stroke Awareness Month, this grateful wife and mother of three

concludes, "The advice I have for my friends and neighbors is to always listen to your body when it speaks. It's easy to excuse symptoms away, but had we not paused to hear what Nate's heart was telling us - and fixing it - our story could have taken a different, far more destructive path."

## May is Stroke Awareness Month - So Here are Some Tips To Avoid Strokes

If you quit smoking, eat healthier, and keep your weight, blood pressure, and blood sugar in check, you lower your risk of stroke! Local neurologist Dr. Lauren Middleton offers three additional, lesser-known ways to protect yourself from stroke.

**Consider a Mediterranean or DASH diet.** Mounting evidence suggests that these diets are most beneficial for heart and brain health. Add in veggies, including leafy greens, sweet potatoes, raisins, bananas, and tomatoes. Make your plate "look like a rainbow," to ensure many vegetables and fruits are included in your daily diet.

**Mind the Migraines.** Particularly the ones that come with flashes of light and blind spots because they appear to be linked to a higher stroke risk (especially for women). Talk with your doctor who may consider prescribing preventive meds or suggest stress management techniques.

**Walk 20-30 minutes a day.** Even if you break it up into two 10-minute sessions, it's worth it: Walking a total of 2 hours a week can cut your stroke risk by 30%.



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