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Personal and Planetary Health

May is National Stroke Awareness Month. Knowing a few simple facts will help you recognize the warning signs and take quick action to prevent a tragedy.

Strokes are the third leading cause of death in the United States and the number one cause of adult disability. Brain damage occurs when the flow of blood to the brain is interrupted. Strokes have debilitating and even fatal consequences, but they are preventable.

Those of us who have seen the impacts of a stroke "up close and personally" can attest to the devastating results. Two-thirds of stroke survivors have some residual disability. A number of mild to moderate strokes cost my father his mobility, some of his excellent memory, and his sense of dignity. Finally, a massive stroke took the life he shared with my mother for 62 years.

As a former speech language pathologist, I worked with stroke victims who suffered brain damage. The subsequent loss of cognitive function and memory, reading and writing problems, speech difficulty and paralysis adds to the confusion and frustration that stroke patients and their families experience.

The F.A.S.T. method of recognizing the symptoms of stroke can be critical for diagnosis and survival:

F (FACE) – Ask the individual to SMILE. Does one side of the face droop?

A (ARM) – Ask him or her to RAISE BOTH ARMS. Does one arm drift down?

S (SPEECH) – Ask the person to TALK and REPEAT A SIMPLE SENTENCE. Is speech slurred, and can the person repeat the sentence correctly?

T (TIME) – Call 911 immediately and get to a hospital fast.

Stroke symptoms can include 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, loss of balance or coordination; or sudden severe headache with no known cause.

Prevention is key, and the good news is that eighty percent of strokes are preventable. High blood pressure, cholesterol, diabetes, smoking, atrial fibrillation, diet, exercise, family history and lifestyle choices are factors that contribute to risk of stroke.

Waist measurement is increasingly recognized as a risk factor. If a woman's waist size exceeds 35 inches, or 40 inches for a man, you may be at increased risk for stroke. I took a measure of my middleand have decided to go public with a plan to live by a healthier diet. No more snack machine meals for me. I will eat in moderation and start an exercise regime.

My commitment to a healthier lifestyle will also contribute to a healthier environment. I will buy healthy, fresh farm produce grown with sustainable farming methods at the Brighton Farmers Market, launching on June 1st and running through October on Sundays from 9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. at the Brighton High School parking lot. As the season progresses, the warm summer months will yield a greater variety of fruits and vegetables. I participated in Curb Your Car Week, another Green Brighton Task Force initiative, with nearly 400 others in the Rochester area. Walking or riding my bicycle to the farmers market at Twelve Corners and to Town Hall—at least some of the time—will improve my fitness and help meet our goal of decreased gasoline consumption.

Wherever you live, I encourage you to take your own personal measure and join me in making healthy choices and changes for our planet by visiting local farmers markets, purchasing locally grown food, and using alternative modes of transportation that will reduce our carbon footprint as well as our middles.

Here's to a happy and healthy summer!

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