

# YOUR GOOD HEALTH

## Hidden stroke victims: The young

Stroke effects can linger just below the surface for younger survivors

By Anna Gorman  
Kaiser Health News

**R**OCKLIN, Calif. — The headaches were excruciating and wouldn't go away. Her doctor said they were migraines. Then, one morning a few weeks later, Jamie Hancock stood up from the couch and discovered she couldn't move the right side of her body. When she spoke, her speech was slurred. At the hospital, doctors told her she was having a stroke. The 32-year-old Hancock, whose children were just 1 and 3, had a sobering epiphany: "My whole life is changed forever."

Now, six years later, no one would know she is a stroke survivor. A lifelong dancer, she is fit and muscular. She speaks clearly and walks quickly as she shuttles her kids around, runs errands and teaches dance classes.

But the effects — for her and other young stroke victims — linger just below the surface. They are there when she gets mad at her family, when she can't remember what she needs at the grocery store, when she tires after working for a few hours. The noise and light can be unbearable, forcing her to escape to a dark room.

Some days Hancock tries to be the energetic and sociable working mom she was before the stroke. Then she crashes.

"I sort of forget I have a disability and I think I can do everything anyone else my age can do," she said. "But I can't."

Hancock is among a growing number of younger adults who've had strokes, which occur when blood flow to the brain is blocked or a vessel in the brain bursts. Because strokes are most often associated with old age, symptoms in younger adults may be overlooked, according to patients, advocates and physicians. And their need for rehabilitation — to return to active lives as parents and employees, for instance — can be underestimated.

"The American public is still very locked on stroke being an (affliction) of the elderly," said Amy Edmunds, who started a nationwide advocacy and support organization called YoungStroke. "But we are an emerging population ... and we really need to be recognized."

The rate of hospitalization for strokes dropped nationwide by 8



**Jamie Hancock, 38, at her house in Rocklin, California. Six years ago, Hancock unexpectedly suffered a stroke caused by a tear in her artery.** HEIDI DE MARCO/KHN



**Jamie Hancock teaches dance part-time at a local studio. Hancock said dancing is the one thing that wasn't affected by her stroke.** HEIDI DE MARCO/KHN

percent between 2000 and 2010 (from 250 to 204 per 100,000), but in those same 10 years it increased almost 44 percent for people ages 25 to 44, though from a much smaller base (from 16 to 23 per 100,000), according to research published in May in the Journal of the American Heart Association.

The reasons for the rising prevalence among young people are not clear, but physicians believe that growing risk factors such as hypertension, smoking and obesity contribute. And because younger patients aren't as aware that they can get strokes, they may not be proactive about controlling those risk factors. Older patients, by contrast, may be more inclined to exercise, eat healthy and take preventive medications.

"Older people are educated and understand they need to take care of themselves and are doing all the things to prevent strokes," said Lisa Yanase, a stroke neurologist at Providence Health & Services in Oregon. "Young adults ... think they are bulletproof. They haven't had the realization that these things can actually be bad for them."

Some young people also may have strokes because of drug abuse, and others because of undiagnosed genetic conditions.

Hancock's stroke was caused by a tear in the artery.

Strokes are still more common

### Stroke facts

A stroke, sometimes called a brain attack, occurs when a clot blocks the blood supply to the brain or when a blood vessel in the brain bursts.

### What are the signs and symptoms?

The five most common signs and symptoms of stroke are:

- Sudden numbness or weakness of the face, arm, or leg.
- Sudden confusion or trouble speaking or understanding others.
- Sudden trouble seeing in one or both eyes.
- Sudden dizziness, trouble walking, or loss of balance or coordination.
- Sudden severe headache with no known cause.

If you think that you or someone you know is having a stroke, call 9-1-1 immediately

*Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*

among older adults though. People ages 18 to 50 years old account for only about 10 percent of the 795,000 strokes that occur each year, according to the American Heart Association.

When their patients are younger, doctors don't always immediately recognize strokes, said Lucas Ramirez, a physician at Keck Hospital of USC and one of the co-authors of the journal article. Young adults may also be unaware they are having a stroke, jeopardizing their chances of receiving critical, time-sensitive treatment.

Common symptoms, for all ages, include sudden confusion or numbness, slurred speech or severe headache.

Hancock said she had no idea of the warning signs. "I had heard about strokes, but I thought they were for the elderly," she said.



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