

Carey Pena:

With millions of Americans impacted, the United States has had more known cases of the coronavirus than any other country. We are in the fight of our lives. This is a pandemic. So many are devastated. Those with preexisting conditions, such as heart disease and stroke, are particularly worried. I'm Carey Pena and The American Heart Association and American Stroke Association is deeply concerned about the public health crisis facing our country.

Carey Pena:

Our top priority regarding coronavirus is the health and wellbeing of individuals and their families today and in the future, in every community, everywhere. The purpose of this show is to provide insight and evidence based answers for stroke survivors and their families. I want you to meet stroke survivor Christopher Ewing, hear how he and others are coping. I'll also be talking to Dr. Mitchell Elkind, who will provide critical information for stroke patients during this pandemic.

Carey Pena:

Let me turn now, though, to Christopher and tell you more about him. Christopher Ewing is a fairly young stroke survivor who lives in Southern California, one of the epicenters of the Covid epidemic in the United States. Since his stroke over a year ago, he has worked passionately to support other stroke survivors by starting his own stroke support group and a number of platforms and channels for educating stroke survivors.

Carey Pena:

Right now, he and his fellow stroke survivors are understandably concerned about what getting the virus would mean for them, given their underlying health condition. Christopher, thank you so very much for joining us.

Christopher Ewing:

Thank you for having me.

Carey Pena:

And just to let all of our listeners know of course, we are practicing the social distancing right now, so all of our guests are in their respective communities. Christopher, I understand right now you're in your studio in Hollywood, California. Tell us first, how are you doing in the midst of this epidemic?

Christopher Ewing:

You know, we are being very cautious. We're very concerned. It's crazy. I never thought I would go to my local grocery store that I've gone to countless times and have to stand outside and wait in line because they were only letting 10 people in at a time. If you go to a carry-out place, I went to a carry-out place the other day to grab my mom some food who comes to stay with me in the winter time because she's back in Detroit where it's really cold in the winter time, although I guess it's had a pretty good winter this year, but she's out here, she's almost 87, so there's a big concern in terms of me staying away from other people so as to not bring anything home that she might catch because she's certainly in the age range of people that are most susceptible.

Christopher Ewing:

But going to a fast food restaurant, I had to stand outside and they're only letting two people in at a time, and when you go in, you have to stand on a taped X that they have on the floors now where they took duct tape and put an X, six feet apart, and when you make your order, you have to stand back from the counter to make your order and then only approach the counter with your credit card to pay and then get back on your X again. So it's a whole new world out there. A whole new way of living, to say the least.

Carey Pena:

Can you tell us about the day that you had a stroke? What happened?

Christopher Ewing:

Yeah. I feel like it was yesterday. I was here at my studio here in Hollywood, Sunset Gower Studios, many TV shows you guys have seen, I Dream of Genie, Three Stooges, all that was done literally 30 feet from my door right here, and I was in my studio and I was speaking to a group of people, some of whom were from out of the country because we were having a big event that weekend, and I had gotten Krispy Kreme donuts for everybody because I knew some of them had never had Krispy Kreme donuts. So, some people were talking and during their conversation I just went and grabbed a donut real quick and I bit into it, and I'm highly allergic to nuts and I felt my lips start to tingle and I thought, "Oh man, there must have been a nut in that glazed donut. Doggone it."

Christopher Ewing:

It was my turn to talk again and I said, "Hey, you know what everybody?" I said, "I know it's my turn to talk, but I feel my lip tingling because I think I'm having an allergic reaction to a nut that may have been in there, so just bear with me." And they were like, "Yeah, okay. No problem." So as I started to keep talking, I knew I was saying something, but I wasn't quite sure if what I was saying was making sense. It was just real foggy. It's hard to explain because I'd never felt a feeling like that before because I'd never had a stroke before. But as I was talking, I was like, "Am I making any sense right now?" I said, "Well, just keep talking. Nobody's looking at you like you're crazy, so just keep talking."

Christopher Ewing:

Well, literally three seconds later, the lady next to me looked at me like I was crazy and said, "Are you feeling okay?" And I looked at her real quick and I said, "I think so." I said, "I don't know. I don't know." And she goes, "Oh, okay. Because your lip is drooping and your speech is slurring. I think you're having a stroke." And I was like, "No. [inaudible 00:05:22]. There's no way I'm having a stroke." And sure enough, I was having a stroke. Fortunately then, because there was people there, I got help very quickly. The ambulance came there to the studio, I was sent to Cedars Sinai hospital where I was in intensive care for five days and then shipped to a rehab hospital, California Rehab Institute, and immediately after getting out of intensive care, they sent me there and I was there for about a month and a half.

Christopher Ewing:

I had a right brain stroke in my basal ganglia, which is kind of in the center of your brain or towards the back, and yeah. Instantly paralyzed on the left side, couldn't walk, my speech was affected. It was a mess. It was really, really a mess.

Carey Pena:

Obviously, for everyone who has had to walk in those shoes, experiencing a stroke is terrifying, and now you have to face this pandemic, so can you talk to us about ... you've done so much work educating and encouraging stroke survivors since you went through that yourself. What specific issues are you and fellow survivors personally concerned about right now when it comes to the coronavirus?

Christopher Ewing:

Well, I first have to give a big shout out to the American Stroke Association because when I was in rehab, I was going to doctor google and doctor YouTube trying to figure out anything about stroke. I'm like, "Mom, what did they call it? A hema-what? A hemorrhagic? How do you spell that?" Everything was just all so crazy. Fortunately, there's the American Stroke Association's website, which I literally slept so much better in the hospital after being able to find the website. I don't say it because you guys are on the air, I'm just saying that you guys were there and supplied me with so much information, my mom so much information, as I'm sure everybody's listening who is familiar with The American Stroke Association ... that happens to my speech sometimes, so I apologize. You guys just put out so much great information. Much like this podcast.

Christopher Ewing:

I really, really, first of all, I have to say I thank you guys for doing something like this because this is obviously at the tip of everybody's tongue and at the forefront of everybody's brain in terms of, where do we fit into this pandemic when it comes to stroke and this coronavirus thing? I think the thing that concerns me the most is we as stroke survivors already are not getting enough exercise sometimes because there's a lot of stroke survivors that find themselves just kind of not wanting to get out of the house because they've had a stroke now or not able to get out because they don't have someone who can help them because some stroke survivors obviously require assistance, so their caregivers are not able to have the kind of accessibility with them as they had prior to all of this.

Christopher Ewing:

So I guess number one is the stroke survivors, especially the new stroke survivors that really require a lot of rehab right now in terms of keeping range of motion and getting enough exercise and movement in their affected limbs, what happens during this lockdown when they're just not able to get to physical therapy, and speech therapy, and occupational therapy like we could a few weeks ago? And then also, those of us that have had a stroke that do have some other underlying conditions on top of the stroke, what does catching this virus mean for us? Our bodies are already a little beaten up from the stroke itself.

Carey Pena:

Christopher, I want to put you on pause right there. Thank you so much for all of those great questions and important questions, and this is a good time for us to bring in our next guest and hopefully be able to get some more answers and provide more information for you and all of the listeners.

Carey Pena:

Dr. Elkin, we're going to turn to you now. Dr. Mitchell Elkin is a professor of neurology and epidemiology at Columbia University in New York City, the current epicenter for the Covid-19 pandemic in the United States. He served as the chairman of the National American Stroke Association Advisory Committee from 2016 to 2019 and is currently president elect of The American Heart Association. Dr. Elkin, thank you for joining us.

Dr. Mitchell Elkin:

Thank you, Carey, and thanks Christopher for sharing your story.

Carey Pena:

Dr. Elkin, are stroke survivors like Christopher at increased risk of getting the Covid-19 virus?

Dr. Mitchell Elkin:

Yes. It seems like that's the case. Reports from China indicate that patients with heart disease and high blood pressure as well as the elderly are at higher risk of this virus, of Covid-19. And we think the same is likely to be true for patients with stroke. Probably because there's a lot of overlap between heart disease, high blood pressure, and stroke, so that's why it's especially important for people who are more vulnerable, like older patients or people with heart disease and stroke to practice physical distancing and hand washing and the avoidance of unnecessary interaction with other people who may be exposed, which is I think the kinds of experiences that Chris was just telling us about, when he went shopping and things like that.

Dr. Mitchell Elkin:

Unfortunately, it does look like there is some increased risk. We don't know exactly how much yet. We need to do more research particularly here in the United States.

Carey Pena:

If stroke patients do get infected, are they at a greater risk of experiencing more complications?

Dr. Mitchell Elkin:

That also does seem to be the case. People who have underlying heart disease and stroke do seem to have a higher risk of complications. This may be because of an increased susceptibility to the virus, it could also be that the body in somebody who has had heart disease or stroke has less what we would call physiological reserve or the ability to handle any kind of illness. So a severe illness can make things worse. It's the same kind of thing that we've seen for many years with diseases like the flu, so that's why, for example, The American Heart Association and American Stroke Association have been recommending for many years that people who have heart disease and stroke get vaccinated against the flu. Unfortunately, of course, we don't have a vaccine for Covid yet, but the same kind of issue would likely apply.

Dr. Mitchell Elkin:

It's also probably because people who have had stroke are likely to have other risk factors for stroke, like diabetes and high blood pressure, which still may make things worse. So truly a combination of different factors that contribute to that increased risk of problems with Covid.

Carey Pena:

Dr. Elkin, if someone were to get Covid, does that put you at higher risk of having a stroke?

Dr. Mitchell Elkin:

Well, that's a really good question and I don't think we have any definite answers yet, but the preliminary evidence does suggest that that could be the case. That people who have had Covid may be

at higher risk for stroke, although it's probably limited to people who have more severe infections with the virus. So in China, for example, about 6% of people who were hospitalized for Covid go on to have a stroke. Interestingly, about 15% of people have other kinds of severe neurological symptoms, like confusion or delirium or potentially even coma. And again, this could be a nonspecific effect of being sick with a bad pneumonia, again, we've seen similar kinds of increase in risk of stroke and so forth with the flu and with other severe infections, but it seems like the rate may in fact be higher with Covid. But again, this is kind of preliminary and I think we need more evidence about that.

Dr. Mitchell Elkin:

Interestingly, there is some evidence that some of the other coronaviruses that we've seen in the past can cause infection of brain tissue as well. So we don't know that for certain with this one, we'll have to wait and see, but that is a concern that people are worried about.

Carey Pena:

And I see you up on my screen in my studio right now on Zoom, you are sheltering in place at your home in New York City. The tough thing is for a lot of folks, especially stroke survivors, life has to go on and a lot of people have routine doctor's appointments or medical procedures that they need to have. Should people be postponing those procedures and appointments at this point?

Dr. Mitchell Elkin:

I think it's really important to realize that this pandemic is progressing at different rates in different parts of the country, so it's always going to be best, of course, to check with your doctor or your local hospital or health authorities to see what the practice is in your community or health center. One big advantage that we have now is that we have access to telehealth. People can do virtual visits from home. We're doing a lot of that now because we don't want to go into the hospital or into our offices even and bring patients there. So less urgent things can be taken care of that way, using telehealth.

Dr. Mitchell Elkin:

In New York City right now where I'm located and where currently the epicenter of the outbreak is in the United States, we're not doing any routine procedures. Part of the reason for that is to avoid transmission among people, but the other big reason for it, frankly, is to conserve the personal protective equipment that you've heard so much about, there have been shortages of this and that's really been a problem for taking care of patients in the hospital. So by cutting out all unnecessary or elective types of procedures, we can conserve masks and gowns and things like that, so that's a really important reason for doing that.

Carey Pena:

Doctor, if we could for a moment talk about why it is particularly important for stroke survivors to take steps to prevent another event during this unique and stressful time.

Dr. Mitchell Elkin:

Sure. Well, for all the reasons we just talked about, it's important to try to avoid getting sick right now. Just remember that most people, 80% or so, even those with a history of stroke are going to recover and don't need to be hospitalized, but as we've been discussing, people who have had a stroke have an increased risk of infection and an increased risk of complications if they do get infected. So it's really important to try to avoid that as much as possible. Prevention of the virus, preventing getting infected is

really key. So that's really what I would advise people to do. Wash their hands often with soap and water, cover your mouth if you're coughing, sneeze into the elbow, stay away from others as much as possible, only go out for essentials right now. That kind of thing. And if people are looking for more information, we do have more information available at The American Heart Association website, which is [www.Heart.org](http://www.Heart.org), or people can call 1-888-4STROKES and get more information there as well.

Carey Pena:

I just want to ask one follow-up question there. If a stroke survivor or a loved one does experience symptoms, what should they do? Call 911 even though a lot of folks have been warned to stay away from local hospitals as you touched on. What is your advice?

Dr. Mitchell Elkin:

Another really great and important question, and I'm glad you asked that. So what I was just talking about had mostly to do with trying to stay away from the doctor's office for routine follow-up visits. Absolutely, if somebody thinks that they might be having what we would call an acute stroke or a sudden event, a new stroke, then absolutely you want to go to a hospital and get treated for it. Stroke is a medical emergency. So in that kind of emergency, it's important for people to feel that they can still access the emergency room and get treated for stroke. Hospitals around the country are certainly open for stroke patients and taking care of them the way we always did.

Dr. Mitchell Elkin:

So if somebody thinks they might be having symptoms, we like to use the acronym, FAST, F-A-S-T. F is for face, if they think that there might be facial weakness in themselves or a loved one. A is for arm weakness, S is for speech difficulty, then it's T, time to call 911. So absolutely, that should continue just as it did before the pandemic and we hope people will get that message.

Carey Pena:

And we want to bring Christopher back in here now, and Christopher, if you can still hear us, hopefully you'll be able to let us know if that answered all of your questions or if you have any additional questions now for Dr. Elkin.

Christopher Ewing:

Yeah, no. I think that that is just really great information. Following my stroke, I created The Stroke Channel, which is on Roku and all kinds of other TV platforms in the Stroke Channel app, so we have a lot of listeners and viewers that have had these questions for the past several weeks now, so this is really great information that you've been able to share here that I will also be able to share to all of our viewers and listeners with The Stroke Channel.

Christopher Ewing:

I guess I would say, Doc, is there any additional thing that us stroke survivors, other than the usual social distancing and washing our hands, is there anything that us as stroke survivors should do as just kind of a super duper extra precaution given the fact that we're kind of in the bullseye target range there?

Dr. Mitchell Elkin:

Yeah. Christopher, what I've been telling my patients, one additional thing to bear in mind is that it's not a bad idea right now to have additional medication on hand. Usually people get a one month supply, maybe a two month supply of their medicines, but this would be a good time to get an extra refill of medications because as things get increasingly difficult and chaotic, although we certainly hope it won't get to this point and it hasn't at this time, it may get harder to get to the pharmacy to get meds, there could be issues with the supply chain providing medications and so forth, so I think it's a good idea to have back up medications on hand in case things do get worse. That would be an extra little piece of advice.

Christopher Ewing:

Great. Excellent advice.

Carey Pena:

Dr. Elkin and Christopher Ewing, thank you both so much. Doctor, I just want to close out our show with some final words from you for the audience.

Dr. Mitchell Elkin:

Well, certainly I hope that our audience, if they've experienced a stroke or have loved ones who have had a stroke have heard the useful information today. We want people to know that although there is some increased risk as we've been talking about for stroke survivors, most people will do well if they do become infected and certainly it's a time to stay informed, watch the news, go to websites from the government, like the CDC or even international websites like the World Health Organization and stay informed at a time like this. And we hope that if you do have further questions, you can also look at The American Heart Association and The American Stroke Association for answers.

Carey Pena:

Dr. Elkin, thank you so very much for your time today and thanks to all of you for joining us, and remember, share this show with someone who needs it, wash your hands often, stay home as much as possible, and learn more at [Stroke.org](http://Stroke.org) or call our stroke warn line at 1-888-4STROKES. That's 888-478-7653. I'm Carey Pena. Take care everyone.