

Stroke and TIA: FAST Recognition and Urgent Referral

NICE NG128 (2019) | RCP National Clinical Guideline for Stroke (2023)

■ 999 NOW: Suspected Stroke

- Face drooping on one side, asymmetrical smile, or inability to smile: call 999 immediately
- Arm weakness: one arm drifts down or cannot be raised when both arms raised together
- Speech difficulty: slurred, garbled, wrong words, or sudden inability to speak at all
- Sudden thunderclap headache with no warning ("worst headache of my life"): possible haemorrhagic stroke
- Sudden loss of vision in one or both eyes, double vision, or loss of visual field
- Sudden loss of balance or coordination with any other FAST sign: call 999

■ EMERGENCY REFERRAL: Possible TIA

- Symptoms now fully resolved but FAST-positive features occurred: still call 999 or attend ED immediately
- Risk of stroke within 48 hours of TIA is up to 10%: same-day specialist assessment is time-critical
- Do not advise the patient to wait for a GP appointment or to "see how they go"
- Do not give aspirin in the pharmacy: NICE NG128 recommends aspirin for ischaemic stroke, but only after CT imaging excludes haemorrhage; stroke type cannot be confirmed pre-hospital

Feature	Reassuring Finding	Stroke Red Flag
Face	Symmetrical smile, no drooping	One-sided facial droop or asymmetry on smiling
Arms	Both raised equally, no drift	One arm drifts down or cannot be raised
Speech	Clear articulation, coherent	Slurred, garbled, wrong words, or no speech
Eyes/Vision	Normal both eyes, no disturbance	Sudden vision loss, double vision, or field loss
Balance	Steady gait, coordinated	Sudden ataxia, vertigo with other FAST signs
Headache	Gradual, tension-type or migraine	Sudden thunderclap: worst ever, no warning

✓ PHARMACY ROLE: Secondary Prevention

- There is no safe self-care pathway for active or recently resolved stroke or TIA symptoms
- Confirm anticoagulant adherence in patients with known atrial fibrillation at every consultation
- Offer blood pressure monitoring: hypertension is the single largest modifiable stroke risk factor
- Provide smoking cessation support: smokers have roughly twice the stroke risk of non-smokers

Key reminders: Time is brain: approximately 1.9 million neurones are lost every minute without treatment; act immediately. A TIA with fully resolved symptoms is still a medical emergency: the 48-hour stroke risk can reach 10%. Do not give aspirin in the pharmacy: NICE NG128 recommends 300mg aspirin for ischaemic stroke, but only after CT imaging confirms haemorrhage has been excluded; around 15% of strokes are haemorrhagic and aspirin worsens them.