

Patients can be given drugs up to 4.5 hours after stroke

Patients can still benefit up to four-and-a-half hours after a stroke if the blood clots in the brain are dissolved, says a new study. Earlier, three hours had been considered the upper limit for administering drugs.

'These new insights will benefit tens of thousands of patients whose cerebral circulation could be restored,' said Werner Hacke, who led the study. He is medical director of the Neurology Clinic at Heidelberg University Hospital in Germany.

A total of 826 patients in 130 European stroke centres who were treated at the clinic between 3 and 4.5 hours after a stroke were injected with either the thrombolytic (clot dissolving) drug alteplase or a placebo. Cerebral haemorrhage as a cause of the stroke was first ruled out by CT scan.

Around 52 percent treated with alteplase responded well and suffered no or only slight impairment, while in the placebo group, there were only 45 percent responders. The mortality rate was very low and identical in both groups (eight percent).

Based on these results, the researchers suggest treating stroke patients with thrombolytic drugs even after three hours. 'But having more time does not mean that we can take more time,' warned Hacke.

Patients with signs of a stroke should still be brought to the hospital and treated as soon as possible. Previous analyses clearly showed that patients respond better the earlier they receive treatment, according to a Heidelberg University release. The results were published in the New England Journal of Medicine.

Every year, more than 250,000 people in Germany suffer a stroke and more than 10 million patients die annually from strokes all around the world, making it the second most frequent cause of death in the world, now ahead of cancer. Hacke presented the study at the World Stroke Congress in Vienna.

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