# Rising self-presentations of stroke patients due to ambulance delays prompt calls for urgent action



Long ambulance waits are increasingly prompting stroke patients to forgo emergency medical services and make their own way to hospital, putting their chances of rapid treatment and better recovery at risk, a report by the Stroke Association warns. The charity stresses that while ambulance response delays are a genuine concern, emergency vehicles remain the fastest and most effective route to specialist stroke care.

A stroke is a critical medical emergency, occurring when blood supply to part of the brain is interrupted, necessitating urgent intervention to prevent death or long-term disabilities such as paralysis or speech loss. According to new analysis from the Stroke Association, more stroke patients than ever are arriving at hospital by private means instead of via ambulance—around 26.8% of stroke patients (approximately 23,491 people) in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland in 2024/25. This marks a noticeable rise from 19.4% in 2020/21 and is the highest recorded since stroke audit data collection began over a decade ago.

Specialist stroke treatment centres are equipped to provide fast, targeted care including brain scans and clot removal procedures such as thrombectomy, which can significantly improve survival and recovery outcomes. Paramedics trained to identify strokes also ensure patients are taken directly to acute stroke units where evidence shows survival odds and rehabilitation potential improve markedly. The Stroke Association highlights that timely access to these services is crucial, reinforcing the advice for anyone showing stroke symptoms—facial drooping, arm weakness, slurred speech—to call 999 immediately and wait for ambulance transport.

Professor Deb Lowe, medical director of the Stroke Association, emphasised the continuing importance of ambulance transport despite NHS pressures. Speaking to the Daily Mail, she said: “Stroke is a medical emergency so anyone who is experiencing symptoms should call 999 and wait for an ambulance... we stand firm on that advice as it is the best way to get rapid and evidence-based care.” She highlighted the UK’s ageing population and the forecasted 50% increase in annual stroke cases by 2035, urging that swift, expert treatment will remain essential to save lives and reduce disability.

Recent data shows some promise in ambulance performance, with average response times for category 2 emergencies (which include strokes) recorded at 28 minutes and 40 seconds in July—within the official 30-minute target. Additionally, ambulance handover delays at hospitals have been decreasing, though they still exceed the 15-minute target on average. Nonetheless, the wider NHS is under growing strain: a separate report revealed that NHS waiting lists have hit an unprecedented 6.1 million for routine operations, and ambulance response times for less urgent calls including strokes increased in early 2024, heightening concerns over the healthcare system’s capacity to cope.

To address these challenges, technological advancements such as prehospital video triage are being used to assist paramedics in diagnosing stroke on the way to specialist units. Cutting-edge research is also exploring rapid diagnostic tools including brief photoplethysmography (PPG) recordings, which have shown promise in detecting severe stroke types like large vessel occlusions, potentially enabling faster targeted treatment.

Beyond the urgent hospital pathway, broader public health and medical research continues to refine stroke risk understanding and prevention. For instance, studies have linked physical signs like diagonal earlobe creases to increased cardiovascular and stroke risk, underscoring the value of early detection and lifestyle management. Meanwhile, investigations into behavioural factors reveal that public fears about seeking treatment during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic may contribute to treatment delays, highlighting a need for clear health communications.

In summary, while ambulance delays have contributed to a rising number of stroke patients self-presenting to hospitals, expert advice remains unchanged: calling 999 and utilising ambulance services is crucial for accessing specialist stroke treatment swiftly. As the NHS grapples with demand pressures, further integration of technology and public education will be essential to improve outcomes for stroke patients moving forward.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-15085367/Stroke-patients-not-make-way-hospital-despite-ambulance-delays.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[2]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-10597807/NHS-waiting-list-hits-record-high-6-1MILLION-stuck-queues-routine-ops.html)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-15085367/Stroke-patients-not-make-way-hospital-despite-ambulance-delays.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[4]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mobile_stroke_unit)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-15085367/Stroke-patients-not-make-way-hospital-despite-ambulance-delays.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-15085367/Stroke-patients-not-make-way-hospital-despite-ambulance-delays.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[2]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-10597807/NHS-waiting-list-hits-record-high-6-1MILLION-stuck-queues-routine-ops.html)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-15085367/Stroke-patients-not-make-way-hospital-despite-ambulance-delays.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[6]](https://arxiv.org/abs/2503.13486), [[4]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mobile_stroke_unit)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-15085367/Stroke-patients-not-make-way-hospital-despite-ambulance-delays.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[7]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-4548952/Ear-lobe-crease-tell-tale-sign-stroke.html), [[5]](https://arxiv.org/abs/2206.02528)
* Paragraph 7 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-15085367/Stroke-patients-not-make-way-hospital-despite-ambulance-delays.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[2]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-10597807/NHS-waiting-list-hits-record-high-6-1MILLION-stuck-queues-routine-ops.html), [[4]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mobile_stroke_unit), [[6]](https://arxiv.org/abs/2503.13486), [[7]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-4548952/Ear-lobe-crease-tell-tale-sign-stroke.html), [[5]](https://arxiv.org/abs/2206.02528)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-15085367/Stroke-patients-not-make-way-hospital-despite-ambulance-delays.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-10597807/NHS-waiting-list-hits-record-high-6-1MILLION-stuck-queues-routine-ops.html> - The article reports that the NHS waiting list has reached a record high of 6.1 million patients awaiting routine operations. It highlights the strain on the healthcare system, with ambulance response times for life-threatening emergencies averaging eight minutes and 51 seconds in February, up from eight minutes and 31 seconds in January. The piece also notes that ambulance response times for less urgent calls, including strokes, rose to 42 minutes and seven seconds in February, up from 38 minutes and four seconds in January. The Nuffield Trust expressed concern over the worsening NHS performance data, especially amid rising COVID-19 hospital admissions, which could further hinder the NHS's ability to address the treatment backlog. The article underscores the urgent need for improvements in ambulance response times and overall healthcare services to meet patient needs effectively.
3. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/us-health-weekend-features-project/article-12216019/16-5MILLION-Americans-risk-stroke-EXERCISING-hard-study-suggests.html> - This article discusses a study suggesting that millions of Americans are at risk of stroke due to excessive exercise. Researchers found that individuals with carotid artery stenosis, affecting approximately five percent of the U.S. population, are at risk of suffering sudden clots in the brain from activities like brisk walking, swimming, or even Zumba. During strenuous exercise, plaque in major arteries can become dislodged and travel to the brain, causing a stroke. The study indicates that as many as 16.5 million Americans may need to moderate their exercise intensity to reduce stroke risk. The piece also highlights that the number of Americans with carotid artery stenosis has surged over the last two decades, with being overweight or obese, a sedentary lifestyle, diabetes, or smoking being major risk factors. The study underscores the importance of understanding individual health conditions and moderating exercise intensity to prevent adverse health events.
4. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mobile_stroke_unit> - The Wikipedia article provides an overview of mobile stroke units (MSUs), specialized ambulances equipped to diagnose, evaluate, and treat acute stroke symptoms. These units typically include brain imaging devices like CT scanners, point-of-care laboratories, and telemedical interactions between the ambulance and hospital, such as videoconferencing and exchange of patient examination videos and CT scans. The purpose of MSUs is to provide hyperacute assessment and treatment of stroke patients directly at the emergency site, facilitating immediate diagnosis and potentially reducing treatment delays. The article also mentions that Medicare has made revisions to payment policies under the Physician Fee Schedule and other revisions to Part B for CY 2019, which may impact the implementation and reimbursement of MSUs.
5. <https://arxiv.org/abs/2206.02528> - This academic paper presents a hybrid agent-based and equation-based model simulating delays in seeking treatment for stroke due to COVID-19 concerns. The study aims to understand how public apprehension over the pandemic might impact the time delay in seeking treatment after a stroke, which is crucial for patient outcomes and healthcare costs. The authors find that even small changes in behaviour can significantly impact the average delay in seeking treatment for the population. The paper suggests that introducing control measures and having multiple smaller peaks of the pandemic results in less delay in seeking treatment compared to a scenario with one large peak. The study underscores the importance of public health communication and interventions to encourage timely medical attention during health crises.
6. <https://arxiv.org/abs/2503.13486> - This research explores the feasibility of using a 30-second photoplethysmography (PPG) recording to assist in recognizing large vessel occlusion (LVO) strokes. LVO strokes present a major challenge in clinical practice due to the potential for poor outcomes with delayed treatment. The study involved 88 patients, including 25 with LVO, 27 with stroke mimic conditions, and 36 non-LVO stroke patients. The best machine learning model achieved a median test set area under the receiver operating characteristic curve (AUROC) of 0.77, demonstrating the potential of utilizing a brief PPG recording for identifying LVO strokes. The research highlights the importance of rapid and reliable methods for early identification of LVO to improve patient outcomes.
7. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-4548952/Ear-lobe-crease-tell-tale-sign-stroke.html> - The article discusses the association between ear lobe creases and an increased risk of stroke. It highlights that a diagonal crease in the earlobe, known as Frank's sign, has been linked to a higher likelihood of cardiovascular events, including strokes. The piece references studies that suggest the presence of such creases may indicate underlying vascular issues, potentially serving as a non-invasive marker for assessing stroke risk. The article emphasizes the importance of recognizing this physical sign and consulting healthcare professionals for appropriate evaluation and management to mitigate stroke risk.