

# Beauty and the Brain

Screen siren Morgan Fairchild has teamed up with the American Academy of Neurology, American College of Emergency Physicians, and American Stroke Association to raise awareness about the signs of stroke.

BY STEPHANIE CAJIGAL

In the 1980s hit soap-opera *Flamingo Road*, she portrayed the spoiled socialite Constance Weldon Carlyle, and on *Falcon Crest*, bombshell attorney Jordan Roberts. As Chandler Bing's mother on the sitcom *Friends*, she tried to seduce Ross, much to her poor son's horror. Most recently, she shed her clothes to star as the vixen of all vixens: Mrs. Robinson, in the play adaptation of *The Graduate*.

But despite her pin-up allure, Morgan Fairchild knows the most important part of a woman is her brain. That's why in March 2008 she teamed up with the American Academy of Neurology, the American College of Emergency Physicians, and the American Stroke Association to raise awareness about stroke. The catchphrase of the "Give Me 5 for Stroke" campaign is "Give Me 5: Walk, Talk, Reach, See, Feel," which refers to a series of questions you can ask to assess whether someone might be having a stroke:

- ▶ **WALK** Is their balance off?
- ▶ **TALK** Is their speech slurred or face droopy?
- ▶ **REACH** Is one side weak or numb?
- ▶ **SEE** Is their vision all or partly lost?
- ▶ **FEEL** Is their headache severe?

The campaign urges people to call 9-1-1 immediately if they or someone else experiences these symptoms. Fairchild is joined by another spokesperson, Diana Fite, M.D., an emergency physician who had a stroke at age 53.

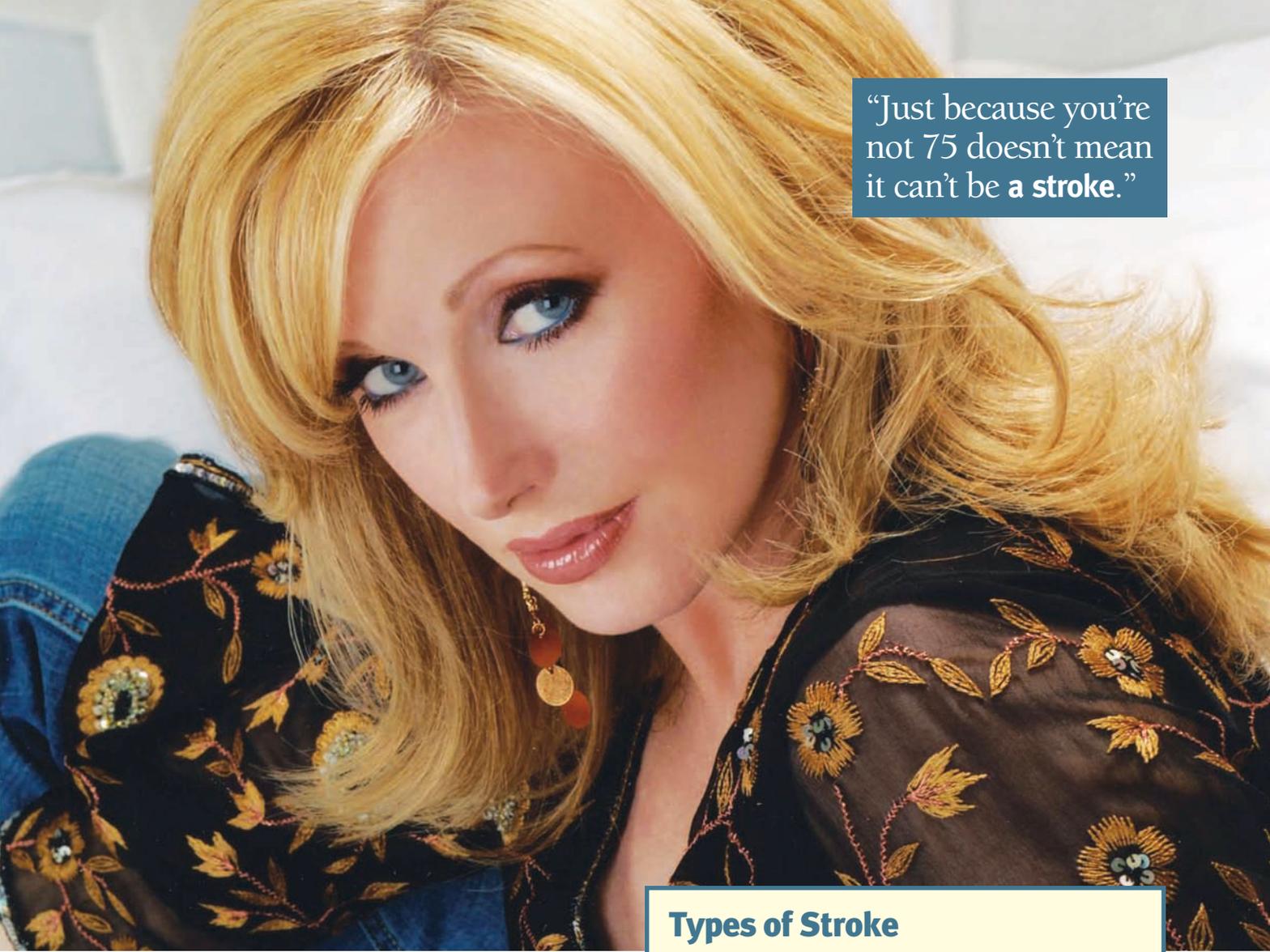
## GETTING PERSONAL

It's a personal cause for Fairchild as well. Her mother suffered several debilitating strokes until her death in 1999, and Fairchild was her caregiver.

"She was out at her ladies' book club and suddenly couldn't talk but didn't tell anybody," Fairchild recalls in an interview with *Neurology Now*. "She was just embarrassed that the people next to her might think she was being rude to them because she wasn't answering their questions. So she sat through the book report, and it was only when she was leaving that she ran into people who knew her better and who sort of said, 'Martha, what's wrong?' They went and got a registered nurse who happened to be there and who recognized it as a stroke. Even then, my mother insisted on going home and wouldn't go to the hospital."

Her mother did eventually go to the hospital, but enough time had lapsed for the stroke to cause permanent damage to her brain.

During a stroke, a blood vessel that carries oxygen and nutrients to the brain either bursts or is blocked by a clot. This prevents brain cells from getting the blood (and oxygen) they need, and so they die. Nowadays doctors can halt the damage by either repairing the cause of the bleeding or by administer-



“Just because you’re not 75 doesn’t mean it can’t be a **stroke**.”

ing tissue plasminogen activator (tPA), a drug that can dissolve a clot but must be administered within three hours of a stroke. In either case, time is of the essence.

“It’s very important for me to get people to recognize the symptoms of stroke so they have the advantage that my mom didn’t have: of getting to the hospital faster,” Fairchild says.

Dr. Fite, on the other hand, was lucky enough to know that ignoring the signs of stroke can be damaging, even deadly. Two years ago, the doctor—who is based in Houston, TX—was driving when the right side of her body suddenly felt weak. Recognizing it as a symptom of stroke, she called 9-1-1 immediately and got the medical attention that led to her full recovery.

## **LISTEN UP, LADIES**

Now Fairchild and Dr. Fite are looking to get their message across to women in particular. One reason, Dr. Fite says, is that as the primary caregivers in many families, women are likely to be the ones to observe stroke symptoms in others.

At the same time, women may be less observant when it comes to their own health, she adds. “Women tend to be the ones to ignore things in themselves, because they don’t want to upset their ability to take care of the family. They know how important they are to everyone else around them,” Dr. Fite says.

The Give Me 5 for Stroke campaign also coincides with

## **Types of Stroke**

**ISCHEMIC STROKE** accounts for about 83 percent of all cases. They occur as a result of an obstruction within a blood vessel supplying blood to the brain. The underlying condition for this type of obstruction is the development of fatty deposits lining the vessel walls.

**HEMORRHAGIC STROKE** accounts for about 17 percent of stroke cases. It results from a weakened vessel that ruptures and bleeds into the surrounding brain. The blood accumulates and compresses the surrounding brain tissue.

**TRANSIENT ISCHEMIC ATTACKS (TIAs)** are minor or warning strokes. In a TIA, conditions indicative of an ischemic stroke are present, and the typical stroke warning signs develop. However, the obstruction (blood clot) occurs for a short time and tends to resolve itself through normal mechanisms. Even though the symptoms disappear after a short time, TIAs are strong indicators of a possible major stroke, and steps should be taken immediately to prevent one.

Source: American Stroke Association, [strokeassociation.org](http://strokeassociation.org)

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**BRAINS AND BEAUTY**  
From top to bottom: Morgan Fairchild in 1985 preparing for her role as attorney Jordan Roberts on *Falcon Crest*; as Nora Bing, mother of Chandler Bing (played by Matthew Perry) during season one of *Friends*; and with her mother Martha Jane, who suffered several strokes before her death in 1999.



research presented in February at the International Stroke Conference in New Orleans showing that the rate of strokes among middle-aged women has tripled. Nearly 2 percent of women ages 35 to 54 reported suffering a stroke in the most recent federal survey, from 1999 to 2004, while only 0.63 percent did in the previous survey, from 1988 to 1994.

“This is one of the things we want to get out—that just because you’re not 75 doesn’t mean it can’t be a stroke,” Fairchild says. “And just because it passes—whether it’s a loss of speech, or balance or something like that—doesn’t mean the problem has gone away. If it’s of short duration it could be a mini-stroke, and you want to have it taken care of before it turns into a major stroke.” (See “Types of Stroke” box on previous page for a definition of mini-stroke.)

**LIVING A STROKE-SMART LIFESTYLE**

Fairchild also understands the importance of addressing the risk factors of stroke. For example, she avoids foods that contribute to clogged arteries. “I grew up in Texas, so everything was deep fat fried. We ate a lot of red meat,” she says. “I don’t eat that way as an adult. I try to watch my sugar intake and junk-food intake.”

And when she’s not filming, Fairchild is at the gym almost every day. “I do it partially out of vanity and because one lives in fear of the bikini shot, but also because the older I get the more fervently I believe that exercise—and more studies show this—is one of the main keys to overall health.”

Not everyone can spend that much time at the gym, but Fairchild also emphasizes the simple but healthy choices she makes in her daily routine: taking the stairs even if there is an escalator or elevator, or walking two blocks instead of driving.

“Even just walking 45 minutes a day,” she says, “just making yourself get out and do things just keeps everything functioning better: your brain, your body, I think everything.”

And what does a busy actress who just finished working on three films and a reality TV show and who is about to launch her own skincare line do to reduce stress, another risk factor for stroke?

“It’s all about trying to find ways to relax and take those moments for yourself, even if it’s just mental moments. I’m sorry, I’m a child of the 1960s—I go very ‘third-eye’ on you—but I just kind of concentrate, even if it’s just saying the Lord’s Prayer over and over again and trying to let yourself go into an area of mental expansion to get away from things. You can do that on a set, on a plane, the office, or in the ladies’ room.”

A little New Age maybe, but stroke-smart nonetheless. **NN**

**Stroke Risk Factors in Women**

Some risk factors are the same for men and women: a family history of stroke, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, smoking, diabetes, being overweight, not exercising. But there are other risks that are unique to women:

Taking **birth control pills**

**Being pregnant;** stroke risk increases during a normal pregnancy due to natural changes in the body, such as increased blood pressure and stress on the heart

Using **Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT)**, a combined hormone therapy of progestin and estrogen, to relieve menopausal symptoms

Having a **thick waist** and high triglyceride (blood fat) level; post-menopausal women with a waist size larger than 35.2 inches and a triglyceride level higher than 128 milligrams per liter may have a five-fold increased risk for stroke

Experiencing **migraine** headaches; migraines can increase a woman’s stroke risk three to six times, and most Americans who suffer migraines are women

Source: American Stroke Association [strokeassociation.org](http://strokeassociation.org)

*Stephanie Cajigal is a health and science writer and the former associate editor of both Neurology Now and Neurology Today.*

FALCONCREST: DOUGLAS KIRKLAND/CORBIS; FRIENDS: WARNER BROS./PHOTOFEST; WITH MOTHER: COURTESY MORGAN FAIRCHILD