Comparing Recovery Options for Stroke Patients

What was the research about?
After a stroke, patients can go from the hospital to either a rehabilitation, or rehab, center or a skilled nursing center until they are ready to go home. Rehab centers provide more hours of daily therapy than skilled nursing centers. Stroke patients may also go straight home from the hospital. Patients and their doctors need to choose the right place for patients to recover.

In this study, the research team wanted to learn if stroke patients recovered better at rehab centers or skilled nursing centers. The team also compared patients who went straight home from the hospital and saw a doctor within a week with those who waited longer to see a doctor.

What were the results?
After leaving the hospital, 22 percent went to a rehab center, 25 percent went to a skilled nursing center, and 44 percent of patients went straight home.

In the first year after a stroke, patients who went to a rehab center were more likely to recover better than patients who went to a skilled nursing center. Compared with patients who went to a skilled nursing center, those who went to a rehab center

- Were more likely to live for at least one year
- Spent more days at home
- Were less likely to go back to the hospital
- Were less likely to move into a nursing home

Among patients who went straight home, the team didn't find differences between those who saw a doctor within a week and those who had a later follow-up visit.

Who was in the study?
The research team looked at medical records and insurance claims for 162,432 people who had a stroke between 2006 and 2008. Of these, 55 percent of rehab center patients and 62 percent of skilled nursing center patients had a stroke of at least moderate severity. All patients had Medicare. They received care at one of 1,192 hospitals taking part in a large national stroke registry.

What did the research team do?
The research team looked at

- How severe the patients’ strokes were
- If they had other health problems
- Where patients went and what care they had after they left the hospital
- How many patients died in the year after their stroke
- If patients went back to the hospital

An advisory group of patients and health professionals helped design the study and analyze the data.
What were the limits of the study?
The study included people ages 65 and older who went to hospitals that were part of a national stroke registry. Results may be different for people younger than 65 or who receive care at other hospitals.

Future research could look at how getting care at more than one type of center after a stroke affects patients’ health.

How can people use the results?
Patients and their doctors could use the results of this study to help decide where to recover from a stroke when patients leave the hospital but aren’t ready for home care.

To learn more about this project, visit pcori.org/PrvuBettger085.