

Telestroke aids critical care when seconds count

Telemedicine – seeing a provider by video from home – is a common and useful part of today’s health care landscape. But as Amer Alshekhlee, MD, points out, it’s sometimes not fast. A person will commonly book a virtual appointment days or weeks out.

So how can telemedicine play a critical role when millions of brain cells are at stake in a matter of minutes?

Enter telestroke. It’s a concept in use throughout OSF HealthCare. At OSF HealthCare Saint Anthony’s Health Center in Alton, Illinois, the [strategic affiliation](#) between OSF and SSM Health allows telestroke to be seamless. Dr. Alshekhlee, the stroke program director at DePaul Hospital in nearby Bridgeton, Missouri, is one of the doctors who sees people virtually when they come to the OSF Saint Anthony’s Emergency Department with a suspected stroke.

“We see patients quickly. We triage them from hospital to hospital. That provides very quick treatment,” Dr. Alshekhlee says.

“We’ll have a video encounter,” he adds. “We examine the patient. Talk to them and their family. Make a decision on what kind of treatment and where.”

Providers will ask about when symptoms started and their severity. They will likely have the patient demonstrate the BEFAST acronym, a standard way to spot stroke symptoms. Providers will look for problems or abnormalities in balance, eyes, face, arms and speech. The “T” in BEFAST stands for time. In other words, if there is evidence of issues in B through S, it’s “time” to take quick action.

“We have a scale. We score the person, and for example, say ‘these stroke symptoms look very bad’. Then we have to really act on that patient.”

That could mean a transfer to a hospital better equipped to treat stroke. Again, providers will tell you time is of the essence. For example, if you start treatment at the Emergency Department within 4½ hours of the onset of symptoms, you may be able to take [Tenecteplase](#), a blood clot-busting agent that experts say could become the gold standard for stroke care.

On the flip side, for each minute a stroke goes untreated, the brain loses around 2 million cells it cannot recover. Strokes can also have life-altering consequences like vision, walking and swallowing difficulties. They can take years off your life and put you at risk of another stroke.

Learn more about stroke care on the [OSF HealthCare website](#).