



## Stroke

### The head and the heart

Ken Wong was healthy and active. So how could he have a stroke? The answer was likely found in his heart

Story Chapter 1

#### **“Gravity wasn’t making sense”**

Ken Wong lifted his foot to take a step, but he didn’t know where the floor was.

He was in his early 40’s, an avid runner and father of two young boys, with a baby on the way. As he clutched the bathroom counter in his Toronto home, Ken felt his next step could send him tumbling into an abyss.

“Gravity wasn’t making sense,” he recalls of that terrifying Sunday morning in 2014. His head was spinning; black spots and stars swirled in his vision. Then he was on the floor, calling his wife, Carla, who was pregnant with their third child.

**“It shook me to my core.”**

Ken Wong - Living with stroke

The sensations passed in a minute or two. Ken’s balance returned, but he and Carla were left wondering what had just happened. He didn’t want to go to the hospital, but later that day, something told him he should.

“I think it was the foreignness of that feeling... not understanding how to walk, and my balance being completely off,” he says. “It shook me to my core.”

In the emergency department, Ken had some tests, including X-rays of his head. The ER doctor said he could go home.

“Everything looks okay.”

And that was the end of it — until the next morning, when Ken was driving to his job as a creative director. The hospital called: “You need to come in right away.”



**Ken Wong**

# Beat stroke.

Join the fight to end heart disease and stroke.

Story Chapter 2

## **Diagnosis: stroke**

Ken had a stroke. That was the diagnosis after further testing, prompted when the emergency doctor double-checked his findings with a specialist. It turned out a clot had blocked blood flow in the lower part of Ken's brain. He spent several days in hospital, but fortunately, the stroke resolved with no lasting damage.

The diagnosis shocked Ken and Carla, as well as friends and colleagues. Ken was in shape, running 45-50 kilometres a week, eating a healthy diet and rarely drinking alcohol.

Why did it happen? And could he have another stroke?

Ken was not aware of any family history of strokes – although his parents, immigrants from China, never spoke of medical issues.

Doctors could find no obvious reason. “They told us that in a lot of cases, the cause goes undetected,” Ken says.

“Obviously, Carla is stressed out. I’m stressed out. I’m thinking... am I going to die? It makes you feel very vulnerable.”

Doctors prescribed warfarin, a **blood-thinning medication**, to reduce the risk of more clots. Over several months, Ken gradually resumed his active lifestyle. The warfarin sometimes bothered his stomach and caused some bruising and bleeding. He wondered if he could stop taking it.

“Obviously, if I needed to be on warfarin, I was going to be on it,” he says. “But nobody was giving me a definitive answer, and I think that’s what I was looking for.”

Ken’s sister-in-law, a physiotherapist, suggested that he see a cardiologist. “Nothing may come of this,” she said. “But you might as well go and see if there’s any connection, or anything they can do.”

### Story Chapter 3

#### **The heart of the matter**

Ken was relieved when the cardiologist told him he didn’t need warfarin and could take a daily baby Aspirin instead to reduce his risk of blood clots.

But there was a bigger surprise to come. Tests showed that Ken was born with a small hole between the upper chambers in his heart, called a **patent foramen ovale** (PFO). It can increase the risk of stroke caused by a clot, especially in younger people like him.

“That’s not necessarily why I had a stroke, but that could be the reason,” Ken recalls. “Learning that was like a kind of resolution; a bit of relief.”

"I think it's important, especially as you get older, to see your doctor regularly to ensure that you don't take anything for granted." - Ken Wong

Leading an active life, Ken runs 45-50KM a week.

Ken and Carla quickly agreed to the treatment recommended by the cardiologist, a procedure to close the PFO using a catheter (a long, flexible tube) to reach the heart via blood vessels from the groin. After the procedure, Ken went home the same day.

Physically, he didn't notice any changes. "But mentally, I felt better right away. I'm not one to be on any kind of medication."

Today, Ken is still running regularly and keeping busy with family — his sons are 19 and 16, and his daughter is 10 — and with work, as president of his own creative agency.

“I feel... lucky is not the word,” he says. “I feel really blessed and fortunate to have gone through something like this and emerged without any deficits.” He sees his cardiologist annually for an electrocardiogram.

As an Asian Canadian, Ken also wants to help break down stigma that can inhibit open discussion of medical matters — in his own community and others. He hopes that his story will help raise awareness that stroke can happen to anyone. “I think it's important, especially as you get older, to see your doctor regularly to ensure that you don't take anything for granted.”

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