Silent cerebral infarctions: not so silent after all

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Abstract

As the availability and quality of imaging techniques improve, doctors are identifying more patients with no history of transient ischaemic attack or stroke in whom imaging shows brain infarcts. Until recently, little was known about the relevance of these lesions.

Silent brain infarcts are common not only in selected patients but also in the general population of elderly people. They are far more common than stroke, both with respect to their prevalence and incidence. Cardiovascular risk factors known to increase the risk of stroke are also associated with silent brain infarcts, with hypertension being, by far, the strongest modifiable risk factor identified to date. Therefore, silent brain infarcts might differ from symptomatic infarcts only by the lack of acute stroke-like signs. However, they do present as subtle deficits in physical and cognitive function that commonly go unnoticed. Moreover, the presence of silent infarcts more than doubles the risk of subsequent stroke and dementia.

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