

Fight Stroke Walk aims to raise awareness on May 3

Event is fundraiser for Stroke Awareness Foundation

BY CALVIN NUTTALL - April 29, 2026

A San Jose nonprofit that has spent more than two decades reshaping how Santa Clara County responds to strokes will hold its 15th annual Fight Stroke Walk on Sunday, May 3, at the Municipal Rose Garden in San Jose.

The Stroke Awareness Foundation, which Chuck Toeniskoetter co-founded in 2002, has helped drive down the stroke mortality rate in Santa Clara County to record lows. According to Toeniskoetter, the county's stroke death rate is roughly 30% better than the next closest California county and about 45% better than the national average.

"We focused on Santa Clara County because that's where we live and work," said Toeniskoetter, 80, a San Jose developer. "What we didn't expect was that it would eventually spread across the Bay Area and then across the country."

The walk, the foundation's primary annual fundraiser, is expected to draw more than 1,000 participants and raise more than \$400,000. It begins with check-in at 9am at 1649 Naglee Ave., followed by an opening ceremony and a roughly 45-minute walk around the rose garden. Live music and a catered lunch round out the event, which runs until noon.

Toeniskoetter's involvement with stroke awareness began with his own miraculous recovery. In December 2000, while at Bear Valley ski resort in the Sierra Nevada, he suffered a severe ischemic stroke at age 55. The entire right side of his body went limp mid-conversation. He couldn't stand or speak.

What happened next, he says, was a sequence of near-miracles.

At 7,200 feet and with five feet of snow on the ground, the odds of getting treatment on time were slim to none. Luckily, the nurse on site recognized the symptoms of stroke immediately and called a helicopter. When the helicopter arrived to whisk the patient to the nearest hospital, she stood on its runners and refused to let it take off until the dispatcher redirected it to a better-equipped facility in Sacramento. After 10 minutes of heated argument, the pilot acquiesced.

The detour proved critical.

At the Sacramento hospital, a doctor offered Toeniskoetter a then-controversial new drug called tPA, a clot-dissolving medication that had to be administered within three hours of stroke onset. The doctor told him that while the drug had the potential to clear the blood clot and minimize the damage, it came with a risk: a 10% chance that he would die, right then and there on the table.

"When he offered it to me, I only had two minutes to make a decision," Toeniskoetter said. "I, coming out of the Marine Corps, knew how to make a snap decision. I said, 'Put it in, I can't live like this.'"

The drug worked. Within 30 minutes of treatment, the drug broke the clot, and 18 months later he had made a full recovery.

Two years later, two other stroke survivors—Pat Dando, then San Jose's vice mayor, and Charles Hoffman, a Korean War veteran—approached Toeniskoetter with a proposition: use his story to build something with the potential to save lives.

The foundation they formed set out to accomplish three things: educate the public to recognize stroke symptoms to help ensure victims receive immediate attention; establish certified stroke centers in local hospitals; and redirect ambulances to those centers rather than defaulting to the nearest hospital.

At the time of SAF's founding, Santa Clara County had no certified stroke centers. The foundation pushed hard for licensing, and Good Samaritan Hospital in San Jose became the first certified stroke center in California and the third in the United States.

Stanford and others soon followed. Today, there are seven primary care stroke centers in the county, more than any other county nationwide.

The foundation also developed a mobile app that allows users anywhere in the country to locate the nearest certified stroke center, not simply the nearest hospital.

"Getting to the right hospital is as important as getting there fast," Toeniskoetter said.

Stroke is the leading cause of long-term disability in the United States, with more than 795,000 Americans suffering strokes annually, according to the Centers for Disease Control.

Strokes are also becoming more common, especially among younger demographics, an increase Toeniskoetter attributes to many factors but with an emphasis on one particular driver.

"It's stress," he said. "Everybody is stressed. This valley is full of stress—that's just what our lifestyle is. There are a lot of factors, but that's the one that got me: stress."

Now in its 15th year, the Fight Stroke Walk has grown from roughly 100 annual participants to more than 1,000. The event draws stroke survivors, family members, hospital staff and representatives from ambulance companies and the county's certified stroke centers.

The foundation is now expanding its focus to post-stroke support, connecting survivors leaving hospitals with peer support groups, stroke-specific physical therapy and informational resources.

Toeniskoetter is particularly excited about a device under development at UCSF: a wearable band that a paramedic can place on a patient's head in the field to identify the type of stroke in real time, enabling faster and more accurate triage. He said the device is awaiting FDA approval, with a decision expected within weeks.

"Twenty years from now, this will be unrecognizable compared to even today," he said. "The goal is the same, to get people the right care as fast as possible. But the tools keep getting better."

Registration for the May 3 walk is available at strokeinfo.org/fight-stroke-walk. General registration costs \$30, with options for additional donations.

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