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Brain aneurysm survivors count their blessings

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By all rights, Sandy Ross and Bob White shouldn't be here.

Neither should most of the other 50 or so Kentucky, Indiana and Ohio brain aneurysm survivors gathering today at the University of Cincinnati's Vontz Center.

They're an elite group. About half of Americans who suffer a brain aneurysm - bleeding from a bulge or ballooning of a vein or artery - die within minutes. Another 25 percent will die from complications within six months.

The rest survive, but some are never the same, whether they're left disabled or forced to rearrange their lives because they can't, as Ross says, "connect the dots anymore."

Ross, White and their peers and loved ones will spend this morning learning the latest treatment, prevention and recovery.

Improved surgical techniques and technology mean more people survive, said Mario Zuccarello, a neurosurgeon at the Mayfield Clinic and the Neuroscience Institute at the University of Cincinnati and University Hospital.

Prevention is harder to pin down.

Doctors don't know why some people have aneurysms, and why some of those arterial bulges break and others don't.

High blood pressure seems to play a role, Zuccarello said, and so does smoking. Heavy alcohol consumption is also a factor.

Researchers also look at hereditary factors. It's not uncommon for someone who has suffered a ruptured aneurysm to have a relative who's had the same condition.

Zuccarello and others are part of a growing movement nationally calling for increased screening for brain aneurysms, particularly for people who have a parent or sibling who have suffered a ruptured aneurysm.

By raising awareness of the damage aneurysms can create, screening supporters hope they can convince insurers to cover the cost of brain scans.

"As much as we screen for breast cancer or Pap tests or prostate cancer or colon cancer, no one argues that they're not important," Zuccarello said.

"But there isn't a lot of awareness and the awareness that aneurysms can be life-threatening and some individuals need to be screened is so important."

Part of the problem, say Ross and White, is that people who've had aneurysms often don't look sick, especially if they're able to return to work.

White, 55, of Fort Thomas, acknowledged he was lucky. He was able to return to work as the editorial page editor

of the Cincinnati Post about six weeks after his aneurysm in 1994.

"I had to learn how to walk again, and there were some balance issues. But all that happened in the hospital," he said.

He said he did worry he'd be viewed as damaged goods. "I absolutely wanted to prove myself," he said.

His aneurysm ruptured in September, just as election season was starting - horrible timing for a newspaperman. "My surgeon just said, 'You have more important things to worry about than a few interviews.' "

Both of White's children were screened for brain aneurysms; neither showed any signs, he said.

Recovery has taken longer for Ross. She was the district reservations manager for Delta Airlines when her aneurysm ruptured in 2000.

She looked normal when she left the hospital, but it was almost four years before she could go back to work. She had to retrain for a reservation clerk job at Delta.

Because of the brain injury, Ross wasn't able to handle more than one task at a time. She had memory problems and became stressed easily.

She's over that hump now, but took a long time, she said.

"The hardest part was letting go of the life I had before the aneurysm. You have all that grief, anger, resentment. I felt all those things. It was so hard to accept that this is where I am and I have to make the best of it," she said.

She took a buyout from Delta in 2005, and now works for the Internal Revenue Service.

It's far from a stress-free environment, but Ross doesn't sweat the small or large stuff anymore. There's nothing like a brush with death to change a person's perspective, she said.

"My approach has really mellowed. It's a rare individual who has no trauma in his or her life, whether it's a personal situation, a family situation, a medical situation. We're all hit with things. You can't change what comes to you. You can't control what happens. But you can control how you react to it. That's what I've learned."