

Chapter 2: Your Risks, Prevention and Stroke Signs and Symptoms

Stroke Risks and Prevention

Certain risks increase your chance of having a stroke. There are two types of risks: those you can control and those you cannot.

Your health care provider can help you learn what your risks are and how you can control them.

What you can control

According to the American Stroke Association, the following stroke risks are those you can control:

High blood pressure

This is the leading cause of stroke. High blood pressure puts stress on your blood vessel walls. This silent condition (known as hypertension) can lead to a stroke.

Your blood pressure is checked with two numbers. The top number (systolic) shows the pressure in your arteries when your heart beats. The bottom number (diastolic) shows the pressure in your arteries when your heart rests.

— **Prevention:** Ask your health care provider about what blood pressure is right for you. Have regular appointments with your health care provider to help manage your blood pressure. Together, you and your health care provider will decide on a treatment plan.

Tobacco use

Tobacco use doubles your stroke risk. It damages blood vessel walls, lowers the level of oxygen in your blood, makes plaque form more quickly in your arteries, raises your blood pressure and makes your heart work harder. Your risk of stroke greatly increases if you smoke and use a birth control method that changes your hormones.

— **Prevention:** If you use tobacco products, stop. See the resource list on page 66 or ask your health care provider for how to quit.

❑ **Atrial fibrillation (irregular heart beat)**

This is a heart rhythm that increases your risk for stroke. Your heart's upper chambers quiver instead of beating in a regular rhythm. Blood pools in your heart and can form blood clots. These blood clots can travel through your bloodstream to your brain. Your risk for stroke increases if you have sleep apnea and atrial fibrillation.

— **Prevention:** Talk with your health care provider about how to treat atrial fibrillation and reduce your risk of blood clots forming in your heart.

❑ **Heart disease**

There are many types of heart disease, including heart failure and heart valve disease. Heart disease increases your risk for stroke.

— **Prevention:** You can help prevent heart disease by managing stress, eating healthful foods, exercising regularly, and doing strength and stretching exercises. Do not use tobacco products. Talk with your health care provider about how to prevent and treat your heart disease.

❑ **High cholesterol**

Cholesterol is a fat-like substance made by your liver and found in the food you eat.

High density lipoprotein cholesterol is also called HDL (the "good" cholesterol). HDL helps to get rid of extra cholesterol from your blood. Higher levels of HDL may decrease your risk of stroke and heart disease.

Low density lipoprotein cholesterol is also called LDL (the "bad" cholesterol). When too much LDL builds up on your artery walls, plaque forms and blocks blood flow in vessels. Higher levels of LDL may increase your risk of stroke and heart disease.

Triglycerides are a type of fat in your bloodstream. High levels of triglycerides can increase your risk of stroke and heart disease.

— **Prevention:** Ask your health care provider about what cholesterol level is right for you. Together, you and your health care provider will decide on a treatment plan. Have regular appointments with your health care provider to manage your cholesterol.

❑ **Alcohol use**

Drinking too much alcohol can lead to a stroke.

- **Prevention:** If you are a man, drink no more than 2 alcoholic drinks each day. If you are a woman, drink no more than 1 alcoholic drink each day. Do not drink alcohol if you are pregnant. Ask your health care provider for help if needed.

❑ **Extra weight**

Carrying extra weight strains your circulatory system. It also makes you more likely to have high cholesterol, high blood pressure and diabetes.

- **Prevention:** Talk with your health care provider about how to lose weight.

❑ **Physical inactivity**

Lack of exercise increases your risk for heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, high cholesterol and diabetes.

- **Prevention:** Talk with your health care provider before you start a regular exercise routine.

❑ **Carotid artery disease**

Your carotid arteries carry blood to your brain. When plaque builds up in these neck arteries, you are at risk for an ischemic stroke (see page 18).

- **Prevention:** Your health care provider may order tests to find out how much plaque you have. Removing the plaque may help prevent stroke in some cases. A procedure called angioplasty may be used to place tubes (stents) in the artery to help keep it open. Surgery may be needed to remove the plaque.

❑ **Peripheral artery disease (PAD)**

In PAD, cholesterol and plaque build up in your blood vessel walls and cause your blood vessels to narrow. This may reduce blood flow.

- **Prevention:** Talk with your health care provider about how to manage and treat PAD.

❑ **Diabetes**

Having diabetes increases your risk for heart disease and stroke.

- **Prevention:** Follow your health care provider's treatment plan if you have diabetes.

Food

Eating foods high in saturated fat, trans fat and cholesterol can make your blood cholesterol levels go up. Eating foods high in sodium (salt) can raise your blood pressure. Eating foods high in calories can make you gain weight.

— **Prevention:** Cut down on saturated fats, trans fats, salt and foods high in cholesterol. Eat at least 5 servings of fruit and vegetables each day. See nutrition on pages 56-57 or visit choosemyplate.gov to learn more.

Street drugs

Using street drugs changes your blood pressure and increases your risk for stroke.

— **Prevention:** If you use street drugs, stop. Ask your health care provider for how to quit.

What you cannot control

According to the American Stroke Association, the following stroke risks are those you cannot control:

Race

Rates of stroke vary among races. Lifestyle and environment can have an effect. Blacks, Latinos and Asians are at higher risk for stroke than Caucasians.

Age

A stroke can happen to anyone. It is more common in adults older than age 55. Your chance of having a stroke increases with your age.

Gender

Women have more strokes than men.

Family history (genetics)

A history of heart disease or stroke can increase your stroke risk.

Stroke or transient ischemic attack (TIA)

If you have already had a stroke or TIA (see page 19), you have a higher risk of having another stroke.

Stroke Signs and Symptoms: Call 911

Tip

You may notice stroke symptoms when you wake up.

Call 911 right away if you have any of the symptoms listed on this page.

- **Balance**
Sudden loss of balance or coordination, trouble walking or dizziness
- **Eyes**
Sudden blurred, double or loss of vision in one or both of the eyes
- **Face**
Face or smile droops on one side
- **Arms**
Sudden weakness, numbness or paralysis in an arm, hand or leg, usually only on one side of the body
- **Speech**
Sudden trouble speaking or understanding language, including confusion, slurred words or being unable to repeat a simple sentence
- **Headache**
sudden severe headache (the worst headache of your life) with no known cause

Signs and symptoms may last a short time and disappear. Do not delay in getting help. A stroke is a medical emergency.

Call 911 right away if you have any of these symptoms.

