



What you should Know About... Stroke

A stroke, or “brain attack,” occurs when blood flow to the brain is interrupted, preventing oxygen and nutrients from reaching brain tissue. Without this nourishment, brain cells start to die, leading to a loss of abilities controlled by the affected area of the brain. A stroke is a medical emergency, but if symptoms are recognized in time and treatment is given promptly, you can survive and even recover. If you’ve never had a stroke but are at high risk for developing one, your doctor can start treatment to prevent a stroke.

Q **What causes a stroke?** Each of the two main types of stroke has a different cause. **Ischemic stroke** accounts for about 83% of all cases. It occurs when a clot blocks an artery supplying blood to the brain. This artery usually has been narrowed and hardened by **plaque**, which is a buildup of fatty deposits and cholesterol (a process called **atherosclerosis**). **Hemorrhagic stroke** accounts for about 17% of stroke cases and occurs when an artery in the brain leaks or breaks. Bleeding inside the brain is usually related to uncontrolled **hypertension** (high blood pressure) or an **aneurysm** (a weak or thin spot on an artery wall).

Q **Who is at risk?** You are at higher risk for stroke if you are older than 55, male, or black, or if you have a family or personal medical history of stroke or **transient ischemic attack** (TIA), which is basically a “mini-stroke.” Other risk factors include: hypertension; high cholesterol; heart problems such as atrial fibrillation (a type of irregular heartbeat), congestive heart failure (heart is not pumping well and fluid builds up), or a past heart attack; diabetes; being overweight; sleep apnea (irregular breathing while sleeping); and use of birth-control pills, particularly by smokers and by women older than 35. Although you can’t change your age, sex, race, or medical history, you *can* decrease other risks for stroke by changing your lifestyle and/or taking medicine. For example, you can eat a healthy diet (fruits, vegetables, whole grains), exercise regularly, lose excess weight, and monitor your blood pressure. If you smoke, quit. Avoid drugs and excessive drinking. Learning to control your stress level and losing weight also help reduce hypertension. If these measures aren’t effective, your doctor may prescribe medication to lower your blood pressure or cholesterol.

Q **What are the symptoms of a stroke?** One or more of these may signal a stroke: numbness or weakness of your face, arm, or leg, usually on one side of the body; confusion or difficulty speaking or understanding; blurred, double, or decreased vision; dizziness and/or loss of balance; and severe and/or unusual headache with no known cause. These symptoms may progress or fluctuate for 1 or 2 days. Symptoms of a TIA are the same, but last for a shorter period and then disappear without leaving permanent damage. However, if you experience any of these symptoms, you should seek medical attention immediately.

Q **How is a stroke diagnosed?** If—based on your symptoms and the results of a physical examination—your doctor suspects that you are having a stroke, you will undergo **computed tomography** (CT) and/or **magnetic resonance imaging** (MRI) scans of the head. These tests will show whether the stroke was caused by a clot (ischemic stroke) or bleeding (hemorrhagic stroke). Depending on what your doctor finds, additional tests may be necessary.

Q **How is it treated?** If the stroke was caused by a clot, you may receive a **thrombolytic** (“clot-busting”) drug to help dissolve it. You may also receive **anticoagulants** or **antiplatelet drugs** to slow blood clotting. If the large artery in your neck is narrowed or blocked by plaque, you also may undergo **carotid endarterectomy** (surgical plaque removal) to reopen the blood vessel. If you’ve had a hemorrhagic stroke, you’ll receive medications to regulate your blood pressure, lower the pressure inside your brain, prevent or treat seizures, manage body temperature, and prevent blood clots. In some cases, surgery may be needed to remove blood that has built up inside the brain.

Q **How can I prevent a stroke?** First, know your risk factors. Second, try to keep as healthful a lifestyle as possible: maintain a normal weight, watch your diet (in particular, try to limit intake of sodium and saturated fats), exercise regularly, stop smoking, manage stress, drink alcohol in moderation, and avoid using unlawful drugs. Third, take medication if these measures are not enough to reduce your risk.

IN CLOSING...

Every year, about 700,000 persons in the United States experience a new or recurrent stroke, and more than 20% of them die. In fact, stroke is the third leading cause of death in this country, following heart disease and cancer, and it is a leading cause of serious long-term disability in adults. You can lower your risk for having a stroke by making appropriate lifestyle changes and by taking the medications prescribed by your doctor.

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