

Be Stroke Smart



Striking swiftly and decisively, a stroke can alter the course of a person's life, often making it impossible to continue living independently. A stroke is an interruption of normal blood flow to the brain, caused either by a clot that blocks an artery or a broken blood vessel in the brain. In the United States, it's the third leading cause of death and the number one reason for disability.

High blood pressure is the number one risk factor for stroke; that's one reason it's imperative to follow your doctor's prescription for bringing your blood pressure back to normal. Lowering blood pressure reduces the risk of stroke.

Other risk factors include smoking, diabetes, carotid or other artery disease, atrial fibrillation or other heart disease and sickle cell disease.

Conditions which damage blood vessels – including diabetes and high cholesterol – increase the risk of both types of stroke. Preventive measures are similar to those recommended for hypertension – a low-fat diet, regular exercise, weight control and smoking cessation. Diabetics should be careful to keep their blood sugar under control.

The carotid arteries that run along each side of the neck carry blood to the front part of the brain. When these arteries become blocked, a stroke is a distinct possibility. In addition to diet and exercise measures, patients with carotid artery stenosis are usually advised to take low-dose aspirin or other anti-platelet medications to reduce the risk of clotting. When the blockage is severe, surgery may be needed.

Atrial fibrillation is an abnormal rhythm – a quivering rather than a steady pumping action – in the upper chambers of the heart that occurs in about five percent of people ages 65 and older. It is often undetected. Atrial fibrillation is associated with 30 percent of strokes in this age group. Follow your doctor's advice if you are diagnosed with atrial fibrillation.

TIA: Take Immediate Action

If you've just had a TIA (transient ischemic attack) – also known as a mini-stroke – you should be seriously concerned about the possibility of a stroke. A TIA is caused by a temporary blockage of normal blood flow, and the symptoms are generally those of a stroke, although lasting only briefly – from a few minutes to a few hours.

If you suddenly find you can't move your right arm or can't remember how to use your computer and then begin to function normally again, get yourself to a doctor quickly because you have a heightened risk of having a stroke. About 10 percent of individuals having a TIA will have a

stroke within 90 days – many of these within the first 48 hours. Eventually, over a five-year period, about a third will suffer a completed stroke.

Other medical conditions can cause similar symptoms, so a complete evaluation is necessary. If a TIA is confirmed, a doctor will prescribe aggressive stroke prevention measures.

Finally, if you have any of the symptoms of a stroke, you should take action immediately by calling 911. Some strokes occur silently, but when symptoms are present, they include:

- Sudden weakness or numbness of the face, arm or leg, especially on one side of the body
- Sudden confusion, trouble speaking or understanding
- Sudden trouble seeing in one or both eyes
- Sudden trouble walking, dizziness, loss of balance or coordination
- Sudden, severe headache with no known cause

One simple test that doctors use is to ask the patient 1) to smile, 2) raise both arms and keep them up in the air and 3) speak a simple sentence clearly. A stroke victim won't be able to complete these tasks without exhibiting impaired speech or weakness of the arm or face.

Unfortunately, the majority of Americans don't recognize these symptoms. Treatment options are improving, but time is still crucial. The sooner a patient gets to the emergency room, the better chance he or she has of surviving with minimal disability.

Stroke deaths have declined 70 percent in the United States over the past 50 years. Much of this improvement can be attributed to better detection and treatment of high blood pressure. Additional improvements will come when Americans recognize the danger of stroke and take preventive measures to lower their risk.



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