

Here's what you can do to prevent a stroke

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The word “stroke” describes an injury to the brain from reduced blood flow. Strokes can be caused by an artery becoming clogged and blocking the flow of blood to the brain as well as by bleeding in the brain when a small blood vessel becomes weak.

Strokes can result in permanent speech and language problems, vision loss, paralysis and difficulties walking, as well as death. Some risk factors can't be changed, but you need to be aware of those so that if you are at higher risk, you can work to change those risk factors over which you do have control.

Risk factors that you can't change include getting older (age 55 and up), being African-American and having a family history of stroke. Fortunately, you can address and control many additional risk factors.

The No. 1 risk factor for stroke that you can change is high blood pressure. Patients often do not know that they have high blood pressure because it does not have clinical symptoms associated with it. That is why it is known as “the silent killer.”

Ask your doctor to check your blood pressure on a regular basis. If you show high blood pressure over time (generally anything greater than 140/90), then ask your doctor to treat it.

Some of the same risk factors for heart attack are also related to stroke. For example, cigarette smoking doubles the risk of stroke. If you are a smoker and you quit right now, your risk of stroke will decrease by 50 percent in the next year.

Another risk factor is high total cholesterol. Cholesterol is a fatty substance made by the body and found in some foods. There are two types of cholesterol. The LDL (low-density lipoprotein) is the kind most associated with clogging arteries and stroke risks. The HDL (high-density lipoprotein) is considered protective, and higher HDL levels can be achieved through increased physical activity and exercise.

Total cholesterol levels above 200 can be associated with an increased stroke risk. Ask your doctor to check your cholesterol levels on a regular basis. If you have consistently high cholesterol, you can lower your levels by changing your diet — such as avoiding meat, eggs and cheeses — and through exercise.

Sometimes diet and exercise just aren't enough. In that case, prescription medications, such as statin drugs, can help to decrease cholesterol levels.

One very important measure that can help prevent the permanent neurological injury associated with stroke is to recognize what is called a TIA, or “transient ischemic attack.” Some people call this a “mini-stroke.” This is when the symptoms of a stroke occur but then resolve on their own.

Symptoms of a TIA may include weakness or numbness of one side of the face, arm or leg, trouble speaking or understanding speech, confusion and vision loss. These symptoms can last from five minutes up to a full day.

If this happens to you, immediately see your doctor: either your primary care physician or a local urgent care facility or emergency room, even if the symptoms have resolved.

It is most unfortunate when a person has had this kind of warning and opportunity to prevent a stroke but does not recognize the symptoms as an important warning sign.

Even if the symptoms completely resolve, anyone who suffers transient neurological symptoms suggestive of a stroke should seek immediate evaluation. A prompt evaluation may mean the difference between permanent disability and remaining independent and functioning.

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