



let's talk about

## Risk Factors for Stroke

Knowing your risk factors for stroke is the first step in preventing a stroke. You can change or treat some risk factors, but others you can't. By having regular medical checkups and knowing your risk, you can focus on what you can change and lower your risk of stroke.



### What risk factors can I change or treat?

- **High blood pressure.** This is the single most important risk factor for stroke because it's the leading cause of stroke. Know your blood pressure and have it checked every year. Normal blood pressure is below 120/80. If you have been told that you have high blood pressure, work with your healthcare provider to reduce it.
  - **Smoking.** Smoking damages blood vessels. This can lead to blockages within those blood vessels, causing a stroke. Don't smoke and avoid second-hand smoke.
  - **Diabetes.** Having diabetes more than doubles your risk of stroke. Work with your doctor to manage diabetes.
  - **High cholesterol.** High cholesterol increases the risk of blocked arteries. If an artery leading to the brain becomes blocked, a stroke can result.
  - **Physical inactivity and obesity.** Being inactive, obese, or both, can increase your risk of heart disease and stroke.
  - **Carotid or other artery disease.** The carotid arteries in your neck supply most of the blood to your brain.
- A carotid artery damaged by a fatty buildup of plaque inside the artery wall may become blocked by a blood clot. This causes a stroke.
- **Transient ischemic attacks (TIAs).** Recognizing and treating TIAs can reduce the risk of a major stroke. TIAs produce stroke-like symptoms but most have no lasting effects. Know the warning signs of a TIA and seek emergency medical treatment immediately.
  - **Atrial fibrillation (AFib) or other heart disease.** In AFib the heart's upper chambers quiver (like a bowl of gelatin) rather than beating in an organized, rhythmic way. This can cause the blood to pool and clot, increasing the risk of stroke. AFib increases risk of stroke five times. People with other types of heart disease have a higher risk of stroke, too.
  - **Certain blood disorders.** A high red blood cell count makes clots more likely, raising the risk of stroke. Sickle cell anemia increases stroke risk because the "sickled" cells stick to blood vessel walls and may block arteries.
  - **Excessive alcohol intake.** Drinking an average of more than one drink per day for women or more than two drinks a day for men can raise blood pressure. Binge drinking can lead to stroke.

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- **Illegal drug use.** Drugs including cocaine, ecstasy, amphetamines, and heroin are associated with an increased risk of stroke.
- **Sleep apnea.** Sleep disordered breathing contributes to risk of stroke. Increasing sleep apnea severity is associated with increasing risk.

### What are the risk factors I can't control?

- **Increasing age.** Stroke affects people of all ages. But the older you are, the greater your stroke risk.
- **Gender.** Women have a higher lifetime risk of stroke than men do. Use of birth control pills and pregnancy pose special stroke risks for women.
- **Heredity and race.** People whose close blood relations have had a stroke have a higher risk of stroke. African Americans have a higher risk of death and disability from stroke than whites. This is because they have high blood pressure more often. Hispanic Americans are also at higher risk of stroke.
- **Prior stroke.** Someone who has had a stroke is at higher risk of having another one.



Age, gender, heredity and race are among the stroke risk factors that you can't control.

### HOW CAN I LEARN MORE?

- 1 Call **1-888-4-STROKE** (1-888-478-7653) to learn more about stroke or find local support groups, or visit **StrokeAssociation.org**.
- 2 Sign up to get *Stroke Connection* magazine, a free magazine for stroke survivors and caregivers at **strokeconnection.org**.
- 3 Connect with others sharing similar journeys with stroke by joining our Support Network at **strokeassociation.org/supportnetwork**.

### Do you have questions for the doctor or nurse?

Take a few minutes to write your questions for the next time you see your healthcare provider.

For example:

**What are my risk factors for stroke?**

**What are the warning signs of TIAs and stroke?**

### My Questions:

We have many other fact sheets to help you make healthier choices to reduce your risk, manage disease or care for a loved one. Visit **strokeassociation.org/letstalkaboutstroke** to learn more.