

Stroke: Warning Signs and Tips on Prevention

What is a stroke?

Most strokes (also called "brain attacks") are caused by a blockage in an artery that carries blood to the brain. This can cause that part of the brain to be damaged, and you may lose control of a function that is controlled by that part of the brain. For example, you could lose the use of an arm or leg, or the ability to speak. The damage can be temporary or permanent, partial or complete. Doctors have found that if you get treatment right away after symptoms start, there is a better chance of getting the blood moving to your brain, and less chance of damage.

How do I know if I'm having a stroke?

If you have any of the following symptoms, call for emergency help immediately. The sooner you get help, the more doctors can do to prevent permanent damage.

- Sudden weakness or numbness of the face, arm or leg on one side of the body
- Sudden dimness or loss of vision, particularly in one eye
- Loss of speech, trouble talking or understanding what others are saying
- Sudden severe headache with no known cause
- Unexplained dizziness, unstable walking or falling, especially along with any of the other symptoms

Another warning sign of a stroke is called a TIA, or transient ischemic attack (also called a "mini-stroke"). A TIA can cause the symptoms listed above and may last only a few minutes, but should not be ignored. People who have a TIA are at greater risk of having a stroke later. Call your doctor immediately if you think you are having a TIA.

Risk factors for a stroke

- Atherosclerosis (hardening of the arteries)

- Uncontrolled diabetes
- High blood pressure
- High cholesterol level
- Smoking
- Previous transient ischemic attack (TIA)
- Heart disease
- Carotid artery disease (the artery that carries blood to your brain)

How can I avoid having a stroke?

Talk to your family doctor about your risk factors for a stroke (see box above) and how to reduce your risk. Here are some other things you can do to avoid having a stroke:

- If your blood pressure is high, follow your doctor's advice to control it.
- Avoid foods that are high in fat and cholesterol, and eat less sodium (salt), to lower your cholesterol and blood pressure.
- If you have diabetes, keep your blood sugar level under control.
- Limit how much alcohol you drink.
- Quit smoking. If you don't smoke, don't start.

Ask your doctor for advice on making these lifestyle changes, and ask friends and family for support. Regular checkups are important to find problems that can increase your risk of having a stroke. Talk to your doctor about whether taking aspirin in low doses would help reduce your risk of stroke or TIA. Aspirin can help keep your blood from forming clots that can eventually block the arteries.

For more information

American Heart Association: 800-AHA-USA1 (800-242-8721)

National Stroke Association: 800-STROKES (800-787-6537)

Developed in cooperation with the American Heart Association.

This handout provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this handout applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.

Visit familydoctor.org for more useful information on this and many other health-related topics.

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