

KNOW YOUR RISK FACTORS FOR STROKE

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A stroke can feel like it comes out of the blue. However, there are steps you can take to lower your risk for a stroke. Start by knowing your risks.

"They took my blood pressure and it was sky high. It was like 190 over 115, okay? I mean, that's a stroke waiting to happen."

There are some common risk factors for stroke. Some you can control and some you can't. You cannot control your age. As you grow older, you are at a higher risk of stroke.

Other risk factors you have no control over include: your family history; your ethnicity – if you are African American you have an increased risk of stroke; your gender – stroke is more common in men than in women; your medical history – if you have already had a stroke, TIA or heart attack, you have an increased risk of stroke. And if you take medication or have a medical condition that may increase your chances of developing a blood clot, your risk of stroke increases.

Even though you can't control certain risk factors, there are many that you can control. Most strokes are caused by reduced or blocked blood flow to the brain. If you can reduce the risk factors that create blockages, you may be able to prevent a stroke.

These risk factors include high blood pressure. High blood pressure, or hypertension, is the number one risk factor for stroke.

Blood pressure is the force of blood against the artery walls. Too much force can speed the build-up of plaque and cause the walls of the artery to narrow and harden. A narrow artery makes it harder for blood to flow to the brain, and increases the chance for blood clots to form around a build-up of plaque and block the blood flow completely. Talk to your healthcare provider about your blood pressure goals.

Atrial fibrillation is another risk factor. When you have atrial fibrillation, the upper chambers of your heart quiver, causing an irregular heartbeat. This can lead to blood pooling in the heart and clotting. This clot can then enter the blood stream and travel to the brain, resulting in a stroke.

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Coronary artery disease and other types of heart disease, like irregular heartbeat, heart valve disease, or an enlarged heart can all increase the risk of stroke. Smoking or using tobacco products, uncontrolled diabetes, and high cholesterol also increase damage to your vessel walls and can increase your risk of reduced blood flow to the brain. And finally, being overweight or inactive can lead to many of the health problems that result in stroke, including high cholesterol, diabetes, heart disease and high blood pressure.

These are the risk factors that increase your risk for stroke. The more you have, the greater your risk.

But there are steps you can take to lower your risk. Once you know the risk factors you would like to manage, work with your healthcare provider to develop a plan to reduce your risk.