

Know Your Risk Factors for Stroke

Sometimes a stroke can feel like it came out of the blue with no warning.

“I did not have problems with my heart or anything, like my cholesterol was fine. Everything was fine. And a week later I was eating my dinner, and I had the stroke at my table.”

Other times, there are clear warning signs that a person is at higher risk for stroke.

If you understand the warning signs and risk factors for stroke, you can take steps to reduce your risk for a stroke.

There are some common risk factors for stroke. Some you can control and some you can't.

“The nonmodifiable risk factors are your age, your gender, your family history, whether or not you've had a stroke in the past.”

The greatest risk factor is age, which you can't control. 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 or Hispanic you have an increased risk of stroke.

Your gender. Women have a higher risk for stroke than men.

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.

“Anybody who had a TIA or stroke is at increased risk of having another one in the future, so importance is to complete the workup and adherence to medical treatment like lifestyle changes like diet, moderate exercise if possible. All that comes into play.”

Even though you can't control certain risk factors, there are many others you can control.

The biggest controllable risk factor for stroke is having high blood pressure, or hypertension.

Blood pressure is the force of blood pushing against the artery walls. Over time, extra pressure can cause your artery walls to get weaker and potentially burst or split open.

High blood pressure also damages the walls of your arteries. This allows fats in your blood to stick to the artery walls and form sticky plaques.

If the plaque grows, it can narrow the artery wall and make it harder for blood to flow through. If a piece of the plaque breaks off, it can form a blood clot at the site that will block an artery or the piece of plaque can get stuck in a narrower artery elsewhere in the body.

Know Your Risk Factors for Stroke

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.

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.

“Yeah, diabetes runs in the family. My mother had it, and my brother has it.”

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.