

What are some common risk factors for stroke?

Risk factors can be categorized as modifiable (conditions that can be treated or managed) or non-modifiable (conditions that cannot be treated or managed).

Non-modifiable risk factors:

- Older age
- Family history of stroke
- Certain racial/ethnic groups (such as African-Americans)

Modifiable risk factors:

- High blood pressure (the most important risk factor for stroke)
- High cholesterol
- Diabetes
- Smoking
- Obesity

Are women at risk for stroke?

Approximately 800,000 strokes occur in the United States each year. Stroke is the third-leading cause of death for women and the fifth-leading cause of death for men. Men are at slightly higher risk for stroke than women at any given age. However, the risk of stroke increases with age and women have a higher life expectancy than men. More women suffer strokes each year compared to men. In addition, women have specific risk factors for stroke (e.g., hormonal therapy, inadequate blood pressure control, or obesity).

What can be done to prevent stroke?

Modifiable risk factors for stroke should be discussed with your healthcare providers, especially the primary care provider. As noted above, hypertension (high blood pressure) is the most important preventable risk factor for stroke, so keeping a normal blood pressure throughout one's life is a critical aspect of stroke prevention. Regular exercise, eating a healthy diet, maintaining a healthy body weight, abstaining from tobacco, and limiting alcohol intake are all key lifestyle habits that can lower one's risk for stroke.

What about oral contraceptive use and hormone replacement therapy?

Decisions regarding oral contraceptive (OC) use should be tailored to specific health conditions and personal preferences. In general, women taking OCs have a small increased risk of stroke. This risk can be higher in older women, women who smoke, and women who have other risk factors for stroke (e.g., high blood pressure). Women who have had a stroke at a young age should not use OCs, and women who have other risk factors that may increase their risk of stroke should either (1) not use OCs or (2) have these other factors aggressively managed.

Hormone replacement therapy (HRT) after

menopause was once felt to lower the risk of stroke; however, it has now been shown to slightly increase the risk of stroke. As a result, HRT should not be used as a means to prevent a first stroke or any subsequent events, and women who have suffered a stroke should not use HRT. In women who have not had a stroke, the risks and benefits of therapy should be discussed with their healthcare providers.

What about pregnancy and stroke?

Although stroke is more common as people get older, strokes can occur in young adults, including women of child-bearing age. There are several reasons why a history of stroke is important in regards to pregnancy. Some medications that are used for stroke prevention can affect early fetal development, and should be avoided if possible. Therefore, female stroke survivors should discuss their plans to become pregnant with their healthcare providers beforehand. During late pregnancy the body changes the blood clotting system; blood clots are one reason why strokes might occur. As a result, a woman with a history of stroke might be treated with blood thinning medications during her pregnancy.

What is a stroke?

A stroke is a sudden change in neurological function due to a loss of blood flow to an area of the brain. This loss of blood flow can occur because a blood vessel becomes blocked off or a blood vessel breaks open. The specific symptoms of a stroke can vary depending on which part of the brain has been affected by the blood flow problem. Some common stroke symptoms include:

- Sudden weakness of part of the body
- Sudden loss of sensation of part of the body
- Sudden change in vision (loss of vision, double vision)
- Sudden change in speech or language function
- Sudden, severe, unexplained headache

For additional information on stroke and stroke prevention – both for women and men – check out the American Heart Association/ American Stroke Association’s website, www.heart.org.

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