

ACP SPECIAL REPORT

Don't Wait for It to Happen to You

Reducing Your Risk of Stroke





Together, you and your doctor can form a treatment plan to reduce your risk of stroke.

Everyone needs to know about stroke because stroke can happen to anyone. Stroke, which restricts the flow of blood to the brain and in the brain, can disable or even kill you.

There are two kinds of stroke:

- **Ischemic.** A blood vessel leading to the brain or in the brain becomes narrowed or blocked, cutting off the blood flow. This is the most common type, accounting for approximately 88 percent of all strokes.
- **Hemorrhagic.** A blood vessel in or near the brain bursts, causing bleeding and stopping the oxygen supply to the surrounding areas of the brain.

The good news is that you can prevent most strokes by controlling your risks, the biggest one being high blood pressure. By working with your health care team, you can learn what your risks are, how to reduce them through lifestyle changes, and what to do when you have symptoms of stroke. Read on to learn more.

To learn more about stroke, talk to your doctor, use this guide, go to www.StrokeAssociation.org and www.nih.gov, or call **1-888-4-STROKE**.

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www.acponline.org

1-800-523-1546

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What are the Chances?



By learning your risk factors, you and your doctor can devise a plan to reduce your chances of having a stroke.

Risk factors are things that make you more likely to have a health problem. You are at risk for a stroke if you have high blood pressure. But your risk is even greater if you have high blood pressure and you're older than age 50. Use the quiz below to learn your risk factors for stroke. The more "yes" answers you have, the higher your risk and the more potential dangers you will encounter.

Check if your answer is "yes":

- Do you smoke?
- Do you have high blood pressure?
- Do you have high cholesterol?
- Do you have atrial fibrillation?
- Do you have diabetes?
- Are you African-American?
- Are you older than 50?
- Are you overweight?
- Do you walk or exercise fewer than three times a week?
- Do you often eat greasy, fried, or salty foods?
- Do you have more than two alcoholic drinks a day?
- Have your mother, father, sister, brother or grandparent had a stroke; or your father or brother had a heart attack before age 55; or your mother or sister had a heart attack before age 65?
- Have you been told that you have carotid artery disease, or have had a stroke or TIA (transient ischemic attack); or have a disease of the leg arteries, a high red blood cell count, or sickle cell anemia?

Be a champion of your own health—talk with your doctor about stroke risk.



How the Damage is Done

Once you know what your risk factors are, you can find out how they increase the likelihood for stroke. Most raise your level of risk by damaging your blood vessels. Work with your health care provider to learn about ways to reduce your risk of having a stroke.

High Blood Pressure

High blood pressure is called the “silent killer” because it often has no symptoms. Normal blood pressure moves blood smoothly throughout your body. High blood pressure damages blood vessels—including those in the brain and the carotid arteries in the neck that supply your brain.

Elevated Cholesterol Levels

Cholesterol is a fatty substance that your body needs to make cells. But when you have too much cholesterol, it builds up in the inner walls of arteries along with other substances. This buildup is called plaque. Over time, plaque can reduce the blood's flow through the artery. Plaques can become fragile and rupture, causing blood clots to form and block blood flow. If a clot blocks a blood vessel that feeds the brain, it causes a stroke.

Atrial Fibrillation

With atrial fibrillation, the upper chambers (atria) of the heart beat rapidly and unevenly. This makes it hard for the heart to pump all the blood out of the upper chambers. The blood that remains can form clots. If a clot breaks loose, it can block a vessel that supplies blood to the brain.

Diabetes

Diabetes makes the body less able to use sugars and fats. Left untreated, diabetes damages blood vessels throughout the body—including those in the neck and the brain. This greatly increases the risk of stroke.



If Stroke Strikes

Be sure you know what the symptoms of stroke are. Be prepared to get medical help quickly if you have symptoms—even if they last for only a few seconds. The effects of a stroke are serious. But fast treatment may result in a better recovery.

Fast Action Limits Damage

If you think you are having a stroke, get medical help immediately. For certain types of stroke and under special conditions, the timely administration of a “clot buster” drug can help dissolve blood clots and restore blood flow. This may save brain tissue affected by the attack and reduce the amount of permanent damage. This drug should never be used for hemorrhagic stroke.

Know the Symptoms

Most symptoms of stroke come on suddenly. If you notice the following symptoms, don't wait. **Call 911 immediately if you have SUDDEN:**

- **Weakness or numbness of the face, arm, or leg, especially on one side of the body**
- **Confusion, trouble speaking or understanding**
- **Trouble seeing in one or both eyes**
- **Trouble walking, dizziness, loss of balance or coordination**
- **Severe headache with no known cause**

Learn to recognize a stroke and act quickly because time lost is brain lost.



Making Healthy Choices

There is a lot you can do to help prevent stroke. Watching what you eat and being physically active are high on the list. They'll help you feel better, too. In many cases, living a healthy lifestyle reduces the need for medical treatment. Try your best to make healthy choices.



can also make your heart work harder, raising your blood pressure. By losing weight, you may reduce both risk factors at the same time.

Move More

To lose weight, your body needs to burn more calories than it takes in. Exercise is a good way to burn up calories and help shed extra pounds. It also helps your heart and blood vessels work better. Enjoy moderate intensity physical activity for at least 30 minutes most days.

Try these easy forms of physical activity:

- Dance.
- Walk—it's one of the best forms of exercise. Try joining a mall-walkers club or take a walk during your lunchtime at work.
- Swim or ride a bicycle.

Check with your doctor before starting any exercise program.

Limit Alcohol Intake

Don't have more than two alcoholic drinks a day if you are a man or one if you are a woman. Too much alcohol may raise the cholesterol level in your blood. Drinking too much also increases blood pressure and adds calories to your diet.

Eat Healthy Foods

Changing your diet results in healthy rewards. Eating less saturated fat and cholesterol may lower the cholesterol levels in your blood.

Make These Healthy Choices:

- Eat at least five servings daily of fruits and vegetables.
- Switch to low-calorie, low-fat snacks.
- When you must use oil or fat, use canola, safflower, and olive oils.
- Don't add salt to the food you eat.
- Choose skinless chicken, turkey, fish, and lean red meats.
- Bake, boil, or broil instead of frying.

Keep a Healthy Weight

Do you weigh more than you should? If you do, your body may be turning excess fat and cholesterol into plaque. These plaques in your blood vessels can reduce blood flow to your brain. Extra weight

The Best Treatment



The consequences of stroke can be severe, so preventive measures become the main line of defense against the conditions that invite stroke.

The most effective treatment for stroke is to prevent it from happening in the first place. Research shows you can greatly reduce your chances of stroke by getting your risk factors (see page 3) under control—and keeping them under control. These steps can help you prevent stroke, even if you have already had one.

Blood Pressure

High blood pressure is the top risk factor for stroke. If you have high blood pressure, follow your doctor's recommendations for lifestyle changes and medications. Many people with mildly high readings (prehypertension) can lower them by simply altering the way they live, such as improving diet and increasing physical activity. Otherwise, stay on any medication your doctor prescribes.

Smoking

If you smoke, quit. Smoking is a major preventable risk factor for stroke. The nicotine and carbon monoxide in cigarette smoke hurt the cardiovascular system by damaging and narrowing blood vessels,

and causing blood to clot. Quitting smoking is tough, but it's worth it.

Aspirin

Studies show that aspirin and other kinds of anti-platelet medicines help people at high risk of stroke prevent an attack. By interfering with the blood's ability to clot, they can play an important role in prevention. The American Heart Association recommends aspirin for people who have already suffered stroke. But no one should start aspirin therapy without first consulting a doctor.

Preventive Procedures

Carotid endarterectomy is surgery to remove a blockage from the carotid artery in the neck. Balloon angioplasty and steel stents also are used to open blockages in the artery.

Medications

Whether you are taking medicine for high blood pressure, as a preventive measure against stroke, or to prevent the recurrence of stroke, keep taking it and follow your doctor's advice.

The American Stroke Association, a division of the American Heart Association, is solely focused on reducing disability and death from stroke through research, education, fund-raising and advocacy. The American Heart Association spends more money on stroke research and programs than any other organization except the federal government. For more information on stroke, visit www.StrokeAssociation.org or call **1-888-4-STROKE**.

What is the American College of Physicians?

American College of Physicians (ACP) is the nation's largest medical specialty organization and second-largest physician group. Its membership includes more than 115,000 internal medicine physicians, related subspecialists, and medical students. Internists treat the majority of adults in the United States. The ACP mission is to enhance the quality and effectiveness of health care by fostering excellence and professionalism in the practice of medicine. ACP is headquartered in Philadelphia, with an office focusing on public policy in Washington, DC.



What is a doctor of internal medicine?

Doctors of internal medicine, often called “internists,” focus on adult medicine. They care for their patients for life—from the teen years through old age. Internists have had special study and training focusing on the prevention and treatment of adult diseases. At least 3 of their 7 or more years of medical school and postgraduate training are dedicated to learning how to prevent, diagnose, and treat diseases that affect adults. Internists are sometimes referred to as the “doctor’s doctor,” because they are called upon to act as consultants to other physicians and help solve puzzling diagnostic problems.

Why choose an internist for your health care?

An internist, just like a family or general practitioner, can serve as your primary care doctor. But internists are unique because they focus on adult medicine. Internists don't deliver babies, they don't treat children, and they don't do surgery. They do, however, have wide-ranging knowledge of complex diseases that affect adults. With in-depth training in adult medicine, an internist is your best choice to help you navigate the increasingly complex world of medical care.

An internist can treat you for something as routine as the flu or fatigue or provide in-depth care for diseases such as diabetes, depression, cancer, or heart disease. Internists often coordinate the subspecialists a patient might see in the process of treating an illness. Internists' patients like knowing that they have a relationship with a physician who is equipped to deal with whatever problem the patient may have—no matter how simple or complex.

**For more information about
internists and internal medicine,
visit www.doctorsforadults.com.**

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