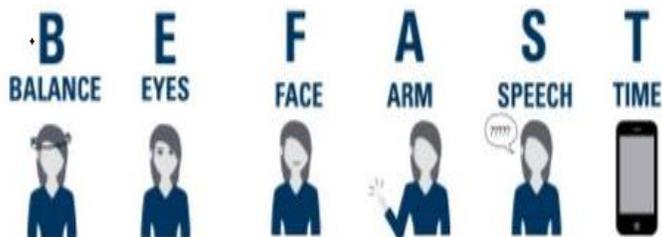


Stroke Risk Factors

A risk factor is a trait or lifestyle habit that increases the likelihood of experiencing a stroke. Some risk factors can't be changed or controlled. Others can.

Risk Factors that **CAN'T** be changed include:

- ❖ **Age**
 - Strokes can occur at any age
 - Risk doubles with each decade after age 55
- ❖ **Heredity**
 - Stroke risk is greater if a parent, grandparent, sister or brother has had a stroke
- ❖ **Race**
 - African Americans have a much higher risk of death from a stroke than Anglo Americans
- ❖ **Gender**
 - Stroke is more common among men than women
 - ON THE OTHER HAND, more than half of total stroke deaths occur in women (*Use of birth control pills and pregnancy pose special stroke risks*)
- ❖ **Prior stroke, transient ischemic attack (TIA) or heart attack**
 - Previous strokes dramatically increase a person's risk for another stroke
 - TIAs are strong predictors of stroke & serve as "warning strokes" that produce stroke-like symptoms but cause no lasting damage



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Risk factors that **CAN** be changed, treated or controlled include:

- ❖ **High blood pressure**
 - Also called Hypertension
 - Leading cause of stroke & most important controllable risk
 - Can damage the small blood vessels of the brain
- ❖ **High blood cholesterol**
 - **High LDL** ("bad cholesterol") = Increased risk for stroke
 - **Low HDL** ("good cholesterol") = Risk factor for stroke in men (more data is needed to verify its effect on women)
- ❖ **Obesity, poor diet and inactivity**
 - *Diets with excess calories* = Contribute to obesity
 - *Diets high in saturated fat, trans fat & cholesterol* = Can raise blood cholesterol levels
 - *Diets high in sodium (salt)* = Contribute to increased blood pressure
- ❖ **Cigarette smoking**
 - Tobacco use in any form, especially cigarette smoking, is harmful & an important risk factor in stroke
 - Use of oral contraceptives combined with cigarette smoking (**for women**) greatly increases stroke risk
- ❖ **Diabetes**
 - Although treatable, those with diabetes continue to have a higher risk for stroke than those without it regardless of whether they are being treated
- ❖ **Carotid and other artery disease**
 - Carotid arteries in your neck supply blood to your brain
 - Can become narrowed by fatty deposits over time from atherosclerosis (plaque buildup in artery walls) which may lead to them becoming blocked by a blood clot
- ❖ **Peripheral artery disease**
 - Narrowing of blood vessels carrying blood to leg and arm muscles
 - Also caused by fatty build-up of plaque in artery walls
- ❖ **Atrial fibrillation**
 - Also called AFib
 - Heart rhythm disorder that increases a person's risk for stroke
 - Heart's upper chambers "quiver" instead of beating effectively, which can cause the blood to pool and clot. If a clot breaks off and enters the bloodstream, it may lodge in an artery leading to the brain & causes a stroke



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Risk factors that **CAN be changed, treated or controlled** include (*continued*):

- ❖ **Other heart disease**
 - People with coronary heart disease or heart failure have a higher risk of stroke than those with hearts that function normally
 - Dilated cardiomyopathy (an enlarged heart), heart valve disease and some types of congenital heart defects also raise the risk of stroke.
- ❖ **Alcohol abuse**
 - Can lead to multiple medical complications, including stroke
 - Alcohol consumption recommendation to reduce stroke risk:
 - **Men** = No more than 2 drinks per day
 - **Nonpregnant Women** = No more than 1 drink per day
- ❖ **Sickle cell disease (sickle cell anemia)**
 - Genetic disorder that mainly affects African-American and Hispanic children
 - "Sickle-shaped" red blood cells:
 - Less able to carry oxygen to the body's tissues and organs
 - Tend to stick to blood vessel walls (can block arteries to the brain & cause a stroke)

Additional, less documented risk factors for stroke include:

- ❖ **Geographic location**
 - More common in southeastern United States
(So-called "stroke belt" states)
- ❖ **Socioeconomic factors**
 - Some evidence that strokes are more common among low-income populations than among more affluent populations
- ❖ **Drug abuse**
 - **Drug addiction** = Often a chronic relapsing disorder associated with societal & health-related problems
 - Cocaine, amphetamines & heroin are all associated with an increased risk of stroke
 - Strokes caused by drug abuse are often seen in a younger population

Healthy living to prevent stroke

There are several steps you can take to improve the health of your lifestyle and help reduce your risk for experiencing a stroke.

Focus on nutrition. Healthy food habits can help reduce 3 stroke risk factors:

1. Poor cholesterol levels
2. High blood pressure
3. Excess weight

The American Heart Association/American Stroke Association offers these recommendations for a **healthy diet**:

- Eat a diet rich in vegetables and fruits (5 or more servings per day).
- Choose whole-grain, high-fiber foods.
- Eat fish at least twice a week.
- Limit cholesterol, saturated fat and trans-fat. Avoid partially hydrogenated oils to reduce trans fats.
- Choose lean meats and poultry that are prepared without using saturated or trans fats.
- Select fat-free, 1% or low-fat dairy products.
- Cut back on drinks and foods with added sugars.
- Choose and prepare foods with little salt (sodium).
- If you drink alcohol, do so in moderation. Limit to 1 drink per day if you're a woman or 2 drinks if you're a man

Get physical. Physical activity can help to improve many areas of your health including:

- Heart function and lipid profile
- Blood pressure and resting heart rate
- Risk and severity of diabetes
- Strength, balance, and endurance

If you smoke, stop! To help quit, you may want to ask your healthcare professional about nicotine replacement therapy. Your family can help by making sure that any other members of the household who smoke also quit.



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