

How to prevent a stroke

Stroke
association



How to prevent a stroke

**What you can do to help prevent
a stroke from happening**

Together we can take action on stroke

Need to talk?

Call our confidential Stroke Helpline on **0303 3033 100**.

You may also find our other leaflets helpful.

- We are the Stroke Association
- What is a stroke?
- When a stroke happens
- Life after stroke
- The road to recovery

We also have lots more useful information. To order leaflets and factsheets, or to find out more about stroke, please call **0303 3033 100**, email **info@stroke.org.uk** or visit us at **stroke.org.uk**.

We are a charity. We rely on your support to change lives.

Produced by the Stroke Association's Information Service. To see which references we have used, visit **stroke.org.uk**.

Please call us on **0115 871 3949** or email **quality@stroke.org.uk** if you are unhappy with us in any way. We will happily discuss any issues and help sort them out.

The Stroke Association is registered as a charity in England and Wales (No 211015) and in Scotland (SC037789). Also registered in Northern Ireland (XT33805), Isle of Man (No 945) and Jersey (NPO 369).

Introduction

We believe that many strokes can be prevented. Although you cannot change some things – like your age – making simple lifestyle changes can prevent many strokes.

This leaflet explains why your lifestyle might be putting you at risk and how you can make positive changes from today.

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"The hospital ran lots of tests and they saw I had suffered a series of TIAs (mini-strokes). I didn't think these things happened to young people."

Claire was 23 when she had a stroke.



What is a stroke?

**Suspect a stroke?
Act FAST. Call 999.**

F – Facial weakness
Can the person smile?

A – Arm weakness
Can the person raise both arms?

S – Speech problems
Can the person speak clearly?

T – Time to call 999
if they have any of these signs.

A stroke is a brain attack. It happens when the blood supply to part of your brain is cut off. It can be caused by:

- a blockage (an ischaemic stroke), or
- a bleed (a haemorrhagic stroke).

Blood carries essential nutrients and oxygen to your brain so it will work properly. Without blood, your brain cells can be damaged or destroyed and they won't be able to do their job. Because your brain controls everything you do, feel, think and remember, a stroke can affect these abilities.

What is a transient ischaemic attack (TIA)?

A TIA (often called a mini-stroke) happens when the brain's blood supply is interrupted for a brief time. The symptoms are very similar to a stroke but usually only last for a few minutes or hours, and will disappear completely within 24 hours. Never ignore a TIA – it is a sign that something is wrong. Always get medical help straightaway.



Why do strokes happen?

Most strokes happen when a blood clot blocks the flow of blood to the brain. Blood clots usually form in areas where the arteries have become narrowed or 'furred' up by fatty deposits. This condition is called atherosclerosis.

What increases your risk?

As we age, our arteries become harder and narrower. However, certain medical conditions and lifestyle factors can speed up the process and increase your risk of having a stroke.

Medical problems like high blood pressure, high cholesterol, atrial fibrillation (an irregular heartbeat) and diabetes can increase your risk of having a stroke.

Lifestyle factors, such as diet, drinking alcohol, taking drugs, smoking, and how active you are, also affect your risk.

Taking steps to change as many of the risk factors as you can, will help you to reduce your risk of having a stroke.

"I was overweight when I had a stroke. Now I eat salad and fruit every day, walk a lot more and have done two marathons. I have lost five stone."

David, stroke survivor



Controlling medical conditions

Untreated high blood pressure is the biggest single risk factor for stroke. The right medication and lifestyle changes can help to reduce this risk.



A number of medical problems can increase your risk of having a stroke. Your GP can test you for them and give you advice on how to control them.

- **High blood pressure**
High blood pressure (also called hypertension) can damage your arteries. You may not know if you have high blood pressure, so you should have it checked regularly. The ideal blood pressure for a healthy adult is less than 120/80mmHg.
- **High cholesterol**
Cholesterol is a type of fat produced by your liver. It is also found in foods like meat and dairy products. Your body needs small amounts of it, but too much is unhealthy. Extra cholesterol can travel around the arteries in your body, narrowing them and increasing your risk of stroke. You can lower your cholesterol by making sure your diet is healthy and low in saturated fats. Your doctor may advise you to take medication, too.

If you are over 40, you should have your cholesterol checked regularly. It should be under 5mmol/L.

- **Type 2 diabetes**
Diabetes is a condition where there is too much sugar in your blood. This can cause fatty deposits to build up in your arteries, which can lead to them becoming blocked. This then increases your risk of having a stroke, particularly if you have had diabetes for a long time and you have not been controlling it very well.
- **Atrial fibrillation (a type of irregular heartbeat)**
When the heart beats irregularly, blood clots can form and travel to the brain. They can block an artery and cause a stroke. If you have atrial fibrillation, your risk of having a stroke is increased up to five times. You are more likely to develop this condition if you are over 65.
- **Heart disease**
Other problems like heart valve disease and heart attacks can increase your risk of a stroke. Having treatment for your condition and regular check-ups will help to keep your risk as low as possible.

Doctors and other medical professionals can help you to reduce your risk of a stroke – regular check-ups will highlight any underlying problems.



Stopping smoking

"My stroke was caused by excessive drinking and smoking. There were no warning signs. I had no idea how much damage I was doing."

Robert was 61 when he had his stroke.



Smoking causes your arteries to furl up (atherosclerosis) and makes your blood more likely to clot. If you smoke, you are twice as likely to have a stroke, and this risk will increase the more you smoke.

Stopping smoking will reduce your risk of a stroke (and other health conditions) – no matter how old you are or how long you have smoked. Giving up is not easy, but it is worth the effort to improve your health.

What help is available?

- Information packs – available from your local medical centre or library.
- Stop-smoking groups – your doctor may be able to refer you to one.
- Health service – can provide practical help and advice.
- Counselling – from charities such as Quit.
- Nicotine replacement therapy (NRT) such as chewing gums, sprays and patches. (If you have recently had a stroke, speak to your doctor before using NRT.)

One of the best ways of avoiding a stroke is not to smoke.

Drinking sensibly

Drinking too much alcohol raises your blood pressure. Binge drinking – drinking more than eight units (for men) or six units (for women) in a single session – is particularly dangerous as it can cause your blood pressure to rise very quickly. Try to follow the current guidelines.

- Women should drink no more than two to three units of alcohol a day. (Women who are pregnant should not drink at all.)
- Men should drink no more than three to four units a day.

A unit of alcohol is roughly one single pub measure of spirits, half a pint of weak beer or lager, or half a standard glass (175ml) of wine.

If you have any problems controlling how much you drink, talk to your doctor.

Drugs

Some types of drugs can increase your risk of stroke by damaging your blood vessels and raising your blood pressure. They include stimulant drugs like cocaine and amphetamines, and drugs that improve sports performance.

If you would like copies of our factsheets 'Alcohol and stroke' and 'Smoking and the risk of stroke', contact us. They include many tips and useful contacts.



Eating healthily

Eating well is essential for a healthy bloodstream.

A good balanced diet can help prevent stroke, heart disease and type 2 diabetes.

The main food groups

Choose a variety from the main food groups.

- Fruit and vegetables
- Starchy foods like bread, rice, pasta and potatoes
- Meat, fish, eggs and other protein
- Dairy food such as milk, cheese and yoghurt
- Fats and sugars (but don't have too much of these)

Eating well

Snack on fruit and vegetables

Try not to fill up on junk food. Choose healthier options like fresh fruit, vegetables and dried fruit.

Aim to have at least five portions of fruit and vegetables each day. A portion is about 80 grams (three ounces) – for example, an apple or orange, a glass of fruit juice, a large carrot, two broccoli florets, a handful of grapes or three tablespoons of peas.

Choose low-fat proteins

Cut down on red meat – choose fish, poultry (with the skin removed), game or vegetarian options instead. Most red meat is high in saturated fat, which can raise your cholesterol levels and clog up your arteries.



Eat plenty of fibre

Foods that are high in fibre help to reduce the amount of cholesterol in your blood. Try wholegrain cereals, porridge, brown rice, wholewheat bread and pasta, or grains such as couscous.

Cut down on salt

Salt raises blood pressure. Avoid processed food and fast food, which contain a lot of salt. Eat fresh foods whenever you can and, instead of adding salt to your food, try flavouring it with herbs and spices.

Cut down on fat

If you have too much fat in your diet, it can clog up your arteries and lead to weight problems. You need some fat in your diet, but try to limit the amount you use and stick to vegetable or olive-based margarines and vegetable or nut oils.

Watch your weight

Being overweight puts you at risk of high blood pressure, heart disease and type 2 diabetes, all of which increase your risk of a stroke. To find out if you are a healthy weight for your height, visit your GP. A healthy diet and regular exercise will help you to lose or control your weight.

Contact us for more information about healthy eating and stroke to help get you started. Call us on 0303 3033 100 or visit stroke.org.uk.



Keeping active

Just 30 minutes of regular exercise five days a week can halve your risk of having a stroke. You don't have to do it all in one go – it is just as effective to exercise a few times a day in 10- or 15-minute sessions.

Regular physical activity helps to lower your blood pressure and reduce your risk of having a stroke, type 2 diabetes and heart disease.

Here are some tips to get you started.

- Pick an activity you enjoy. This could be swimming, dancing or T'ai Chi – it doesn't matter what you do as long as it makes you feel warm and slightly out of breath.
- Don't overdo it – build up gradually to 30 minutes a day.
- Warm up before exercising and cool down afterwards.
- Find someone to exercise with.
- Be more active during the day – take the stairs instead of the lift or escalator and walk to the shops instead of driving.

If you haven't been active for some time, especially if you're over 40 or have a medical condition, get your doctor's advice before you start. If you feel dizzy, have pain (especially in your chest) or you find it difficult to breathe, stop exercising straightaway and tell your doctor.



Other factors

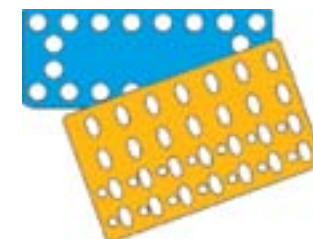
Stress and depression

Many things in life – like work issues, redundancy, family problems and bereavement – can lead to stress and depression. These not only take a physical toll on your body, but if they are not treated, they can lead to long-term health problems. It's important that you get any help you need from your doctor and other healthcare professionals.

Risk factors for women

There are some things that can increase the risk of stroke for women. High levels of the female hormone oestrogen can make your blood more likely to clot. During pregnancy oestrogen levels rise naturally, but there are also hormone treatments that will cause it to rise, such as contraceptives which contain oestrogen, and hormone replacement therapy (HRT).

Always discuss contraception and hormone treatments with your doctor and make a decision that is right for you.



Things you can't change

You may have an increased risk of a stroke because of things you can't change. These include the following.



- **Family history** – you are more at risk if someone in your family has had a stroke.
- **Age** – arteries harden and become furred up with age, which means older people are more likely to have a stroke.
- **Gender (sex)** – in people under the age of 75, men have more strokes than women.
- **Ethnic background** – if you are of South Asian or African-Caribbean origin, you are more at risk.

If you have any of the above risk factors, improving your lifestyle is even more important to reduce your risk of having a stroke. Many strokes can be prevented.



Reducing your risk of another stroke

Although your risk of having a stroke is higher if you have already had a stroke or a TIA (mini-stroke), there are positive steps you can take to reduce your risk. It is important that you:

- take any medication your doctor prescribes
- have regular health check-ups to make sure it is working for you, and
- take your doctor's advice about your lifestyle.

You may also have had an operation after your stroke to lower your risk of having another one, for example on the arteries in your neck, or within your brain after some types of bleed. Make sure you follow your after-care advice.

It's never too late to change your lifestyle and improve your health.

Useful contacts

Blood Pressure Association

www.bpassoc.org.uk
0845 241 0989

British Heart Foundation

www.bhf.org.uk
0300 330 3311

Diabetes UK

www.diabetes.org.uk
0845 120 2960

Drinkaware

www.drinkaware.co.uk
020 7766 9900

Quit

www.quit.org.uk
0800 002 200



We are the Stroke Association

We believe in life after stroke. That's why we support stroke survivors to make the best recovery they can. It's why we campaign for better stroke care. And it's why we fund research into finding new treatments and ways of preventing stroke.

We're here for you. If you'd like to know more please get in touch.

Stroke Helpline: 0303 3033 100

Website: stroke.org.uk

Email: info@stroke.org.uk

Textphone: 18001 0303 3033 100

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