Reducing your risk of stroke: information for South Asian people

Stoke can happen to anyone at any time, but if you have South Asian origins you may have a higher risk of stroke than other people in the UK. This guide explains the factors that can make you more at risk of a stroke and what you can do about them.

What do I need to know about stroke if I am South Asian?

In the UK, people of South Asian origins are more likely to have a stroke at a younger age than white people. If you are South Asian you are also more likely to develop health problems that can increase your risk of a stroke, such as diabetes.

People from South Asian backgrounds may be more likely to carry weight around their waist, smoke and not get enough exercise, which can all increase the chances of developing medical conditions linked to stroke, such as high blood pressure and heart disease.

There may be a genetic link that makes people in this ethnic group more likely to have a stroke, so it’s important to understand your own risk factors. This guide gives ideas for easy ways that everyone can lower their stroke risk.

What is a stroke?

A stroke is a brain attack. It happens when the blood supply to part of your brain is cut off, killing brain cells. Damage to the brain can affect how the body works. It can also change how you think and feel.

Who is South Asian?

People from the following countries are usually defined as having South Asian origins: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

What factors will increase my risk of a stroke?

Diabetes

South Asian people are around twice as likely to develop diabetes as the rest of the UK population, and are likely to develop it at an earlier age. They may also develop complications of diabetes, like heart disease and stroke, at a younger age.
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Diabetes happens when the body can’t control the amount of sugar in the blood. There are two main types of diabetes.

- **Type 1** is when the body stops producing insulin, the main hormone responsible for controlling blood sugar. This type of diabetes usually begins in childhood and around 10% of diabetics have type 1.

- **Type 2** is when the body does not produce enough insulin, or the body’s cells don’t react to insulin in the right way. Type 2 diabetes is highly associated with obesity and physical inactivity, and can develop in children and adults. This type of diabetes accounts for around 90% of diabetics.

Having diabetes almost doubles your risk of stroke, and contributes to up to one in five strokes. This is because high levels of sugar in the blood can damage your blood vessels, making them harder and narrower and more likely to become blocked. If this happens in a blood vessel supplying blood to your brain it could cause a stroke.

**What can I do about diabetes?**
As South Asian people are more at risk of developing diabetes it is important that you get checked by your GP, especially if you are 25 or over and you have any of the following conditions:

- a history of diabetes in your family
- a history of heart disease or stroke
- having high blood pressure
- being overweight or obese
- having diabetes during pregnancy.

If you have diabetes, you must have regular check-ups with your GP or at a diabetes clinic to make sure your blood glucose and blood pressure stay at healthy levels.

Type 2 diabetes can sometimes be managed by making changes to your lifestyle, such as eating healthy food or doing more exercise. There are tips about leading a healthier lifestyle further on in this guide.

**High blood pressure**

High blood pressure contributes to over half of all strokes, and there is evidence that its effect on the risk of stroke may be greater for people from South Asia.

Blood pressure is the measure of how strongly your blood presses against the walls of your arteries when it is pumped around your body. If this pressure is too high it puts a strain on your arteries and heart, which can cause health problems and lead to a stroke or heart attack.

High blood pressure (also known as hypertension) is when your blood pressure is consistently too high (140/90mmHg or higher).

High blood pressure puts additional strain on all the blood vessels in your body, including the ones supplying your brain. This makes a blockage more likely, or causes an already weakened blood vessel in the brain to bleed and cause a stroke.

**What can I do about high blood pressure?**
High blood pressure usually has no symptoms, so you need to have your blood pressure measured regularly. All adults over 18 should have their blood pressure measured at least every five years.
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However, if you are over 40, have blood pressure above 130/85mmHg or are overweight, you should get your blood pressure checked more frequently and ideally at least once a year. This can be done by your GP or nurse, or you can check it yourself with a home testing device.

Leading a healthy lifestyle can help you to greatly reduce your risk of high blood pressure. You can read more about this further on in this guide.

Atrial Fibrillation (AF)

AF is a type of irregular, uncoordinated heartbeat that can cause blood clots to form in the heart. If these clots block the blood supply to your brain, they can cause a stroke.

Although South Asian people may be slightly less likely to have AF than the rest of the population in the UK, if you do have AF you will have an increased stroke risk.

What can I do about AF?
Your doctor can test whether you have AF by checking your pulse and performing an electrocardiogram (ECG) – a simple and painless test that records the rhythm and electrical activity of your heart.

If you have AF you can be treated with blood-thinning medications which help prevent clots from forming. You can also take some healthy lifestyle steps such as being physically active and eating healthily, which can help reduce the risks from AF.

High cholesterol

Cholesterol is a fatty substance and is vital for your body to function properly. Most of the cholesterol in our bodies is made by the liver, but it can also be absorbed from some of the foods we eat.

Cholesterol is carried in your blood by special proteins called lipoproteins. There are two types.

- Low-density lipoprotein (LDL) carries cholesterol from your liver to the cells that need it. It is often called ‘bad cholesterol’ because if there is too much, it can build up in your artery walls.

- High-density lipoprotein (HDL) is known as ‘good cholesterol’ because it carries cholesterol away from the cells and back to your liver, where it is either broken down or passed out of the body.

It is the overall balance of good and bad cholesterol in the body that affects your risk of having a stroke. Too much bad cholesterol in your blood can cause fatty deposits to build up in your arteries and restrict the flow of blood. It also increases the chance of a blood clot developing.

South Asian people tend to have similar levels of cholesterol when compared to the UK general population. However, some research suggests that South Asian people tend to have lower levels of HDL (good cholesterol), and that their LDL (bad cholesterol) is more likely to cause fatty deposits in their arteries compared to people from other ethnic groups.

On top of that, South Asian people tend to have higher levels of triglycerides, another type of fatty substance in the body. This, combined with type 2 diabetes and low levels of ‘good’ cholesterol (HDLs), can lead to higher risk for heart disease which in turn increases the risk of a stroke.
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What can I do about high cholesterol?
High cholesterol usually has no symptoms, so you need to have your cholesterol level checked, especially if you are over 40 and have any other risk factors, including:

- history of heart disease or high cholesterol in your family
- being overweight
- high blood pressure or diabetes
- smoking.

Your GP can check your cholesterol level with a simple blood test. Making changes to your lifestyle can help to reduce your cholesterol, and you may be given drugs called statins to help reduce your risk of a stroke.

Your lifestyle

You can help to reduce your risk of a stroke by making some healthy lifestyle choices.

Stop smoking

Smoking doubles your risk of dying from a stroke. Some people smoke cigarettes, but bidi/beedi and shisha also use tobacco, so if you smoke these you are at risk of the same kinds of diseases as cigarette smokers. In one session of using shisha you can inhale as much smoke as if you smoked 100 cigarettes.

The nicotine in tobacco is highly addictive so giving up is not always easy, but there is a lot of support available to help you. You should be able to find an NHS Stop Smoking Service that can give you advice on the best way to quit. Speak to your GP or call the NHS Smokefree helpline to find your nearest service. You can find helpline numbers at the end of this guide.

Cut down on alcohol

If you do drink alcohol, keep within the safe limits recommended by the government. The guidelines say that men and women should drink no more than 14 units per week.

Drinking a lot in a single session is particularly risky, as it can cause your blood pressure to rise very quickly. To reduce your risk, spread out your drinking over the week and have several dry days in a week. For more information see our guide F13, Alcohol and stroke.

Reduce your waist size

South Asian people tend to carry more weight around their waist than the rest of the population. If you carry extra weight around your waist you are more likely to develop diabetes, high blood pressure and other health problems. Another way of measuring obesity is BMI, or body mass index. This shows whether you are the right weight for your height. The main population should have a BMI of 25, but people from South Asian ethnic groups should aim to keep below a BMI of 23. This is because of the higher risk of diabetes, high triglyceride levels, and high blood pressure in South Asian groups.

Eat healthily

Eating a healthy, balanced diet can help to lower your blood pressure and the amount of cholesterol in your blood. It can also help to control diabetes. All of this will reduce your risk of having a stroke.

We should all eat a variety of fruit, vegetables, starchy food rich in fibre, and protein.
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Tips for a healthy diet

Eat more fruit and vegetables
Fruit and vegetables are an important source of vitamins and minerals and you should aim to have five portions of fruit and vegetables every day.

Eat more fibre
Eating plenty of fibre as part of a healthy balanced diet has been associated with a lower risk of stroke, heart disease and type 2 diabetes.

Good ways to increase your fibre intake include choosing high-fibre breakfast cereals such as plain shredded whole grains or oats. Try going for wholemeal or granary breads and choosing wholewheat pasta, bulgur wheat or brown rice. Use potatoes with their skins on and add pulses such as beans, lentils or chickpeas to other dishes such as salads or stews. Include plenty of vegetable with meals.

Eat more healthy protein
Meat and fish, beans, peas and lentils are all good sources of protein and you should aim to have two portions of protein every day.

Fatty cuts of red meat are high in saturated fat, which can raise your cholesterol, so limit the amount you eat. You could try adding beans or lentils to your stews and curries to replace some of the meat you use.

It’s a good idea to eat two portions of fish every week, especially oily fish like mackerel, sardines or salmon. Vegetarian or vegan sources of protein include tofu, mycoprotein such as Quorn, textured vegetable protein and tempeh.

Milk and other dairy products can also provide a good source of protein but try to use low fat options. When making lassi, paneer, yoghurt or pudding use semi-skimmed instead of full-fat milk.

Cut down on fat
We all need small amounts of fat in our diets, but too much can lead to weight problems. Food that has been fried in butter or ghee will contain high amounts of saturated fat. Try using small amounts of unsaturated fat such as peanut oil or soya oil instead of butter.

Reduce sugar
Having too much sugar can make you gain weight, so you should aim for no more than 7 sugar cubes worth of sugar a day (about 30g). Try to avoid foods with hidden sugar like ready-made pasta sauces, sweetened breakfast cereals, and fizzy drinks like cola. Sweet treats such as jalebi, ladoo, gulab jamun and burfi contain a lot of sugar, so try not to eat them every day.

Try new ways of cooking
How you prepare your food is just as important as what you eat. Steaming, boiling and grilling are all healthier than frying, which adds extra fat. Fried foods such as samosas, pakoras, chips or fried bread like bhaturas or puri should be enjoyed as occasional treats, rather than a regular part of your diet.

Keep salt low
Too much salt can increase your blood pressure. We all need a small amount of salt in our diets but the most we should have in a day is 6g (or a teaspoon) of salt. Much of the salt we eat is hidden in processed foods such as ready meals, sauces and snacks like chevda, ganthia, sev and salted nuts. Keep these as an occasional treat and avoid adding salt to food when you’re cooking or at the table. Using spices and lemon juice can add flavour to replace the taste of salt.

For more information visit stroke.org.uk
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Take more exercise
Regular exercise can reduce your risk of having a stroke by lowering blood pressure and helping you to maintain a healthy weight. If you have diabetes it can help to control your blood sugar, and it can improve blood cholesterol levels. On top of that, it can also help to reduce stress and depression.

Regular, moderate exercise can reduce your risk of stroke by up to 27%. You should aim to do at least 30 minutes of physical activity five or more times a week. You don’t have to do all 30 minutes at once, it can be broken up into smaller blocks of time throughout the day.

You can choose any form of exercise as long as the activity increases your heart rate and makes you feel warm and a little out of breath. So you could try yoga or dancing or simply make small changes to the things you do every day – walking to the shops instead of driving, doing some gardening or using the stairs instead of a lift can all count towards your daily total.

If you haven’t been active for some time, and especially if you’re over 40 or have a medical condition, make sure you speak to your doctor before you start doing lots of physical activity.

Spotting the signs of a stroke

The FAST test helps to spot the three most common symptoms of stroke. But there are other signs that you should always take seriously. These include:

- sudden weakness or numbness on one side of the body, including legs, hands or feet
- difficulty finding words or speaking in clear sentences
- sudden blurred vision or loss of sight in one or both eyes
- sudden memory loss or confusion, and dizziness or a sudden fall
- a sudden, severe headache.

Stroke can happen to anyone, at any age. Every second counts. If you spot any of these signs of a stroke, don’t wait. Call 999 straight away.
Where to get help and information

From the Stroke Association

Talk to us
Our Stroke Helpline is for anyone affected by a stroke, including family, friends and carers. The Helpline can give you information and support on any aspect of stroke.

Call us on **0303 3033 100**, from a textphone **18001 0303 3033 100** or email info@stroke.org.uk.

Read our publications
We publish detailed information about a wide range of stroke topics including reducing your risk of a stroke and rehabilitation. Read online at stroke.org.uk or call the Helpline to ask for printed copies.

Other sources of help and information

**Blood Pressure UK**
**Website:** www.bloodpressureuk.org  
**Helpline:** 0207 882 621  
A charity that works to lower the nation’s blood pressure and tries to prevent stroke and heart disease. A range of publications is available.

**British Heart Foundation**
**Website:** www.bhf.org.uk  
**Heart Helpline:** 0300 330 3311  
**Publications Order Line:** 0870 600 6566  
Offers a wide range of publications on heart conditions and blood pressure. The helpline is staffed by cardiac nurses who can provide information on heart and health issues.

**British Nutrition Foundation**
**Website:** www.nutrition.org.uk  
**Tel:** 0207 557 7930  
**Email:** postbox@nutrition.org.uk  
Provides information on nutrition and healthy eating.

**Confederation of Indian organisations (UK) Stroke Project**
**Website:** www.ciostrokeproject.co.uk  
**Tel:** 0845 303 3100  
Works to prevent stroke in South Asian communities and to ensure that their needs are addressed within national and local policy and services.

**Diabetes UK**
**Website:** www.diabetes.org.uk  
**Careline:** 0345 123 2399  
Provides information and support for people affected by diabetes.

**Heart UK**
**Website:** www.heartuk.org.uk  
**Helpline:** 0345 450 5988  
**Email:** ask@heartuk.org.uk  
Works to prevent premature deaths caused by high cholesterol. On Tuesdays the Helpline provides dietary advice in Punjabi, Urdu and Hindi.

**NHS Brainstroke**
**Website:** www.brainstroke.org.uk  
Provides information about stroke for South Asian communities, including information in Urdu, Sylheti, Punjabi and Gujarati.

**NHS Inform**
**Website:** www.nhsinform.scot  
**Tel:** 0800 224 488  
Provides health and care information for people in Scotland. Its various guides and articles have information on blood pressure, diet and lifestyle.
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NHS Smokefree
Website: www.nhs.uk/smokefree
Offers information and support for stopping smoking.

South Asian Health Foundation
Website: www.sahf.org.uk
Tel: 07807 069 719
Email: info@sahf.org.uk
Promotes healthcare research in the South Asian community and campaigns on health issues.

Weight Concern
Website: www.weightconcern.org.uk
Tel: 020 7679 1853
Offers information and sources of support on healthy eating and weight loss.

About our information
We want to provide the best information for people affected by stroke. That’s why we ask stroke survivors and their families, as well as medical experts, to help us put our publications together.

How did we do?
To tell us what you think of this guide, or to request a list of the sources we used to create it, email us at feedback@stroke.org.uk.

Accessible formats
Visit our website if you need this information in audio, large print or braille.

Always get individual advice
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Together we can conquer stroke.

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).

For more information visit stroke.org.uk