

Health Alert: Preventing Stroke

Three key strategies to protect yourself against this growing threat

Stroke is the third-highest cause of death behind heart disease and cancer. About 60 percent of stroke deaths occur in women, and I recently read a surprising study that indicates mid-life stroke is far more common in women than in men (*Neurology*, November 2007). Researchers followed over 17,000 people for five years and found that women aged 45 to 54 were more than twice as likely to have suffered a stroke as their male counterparts. One possible reason: Stroke risk factors seem to increase at a faster rate in women. Fortunately, dietary and other lifestyle changes can reduce many of those risks. Here are my latest recommendations to protect yourself against stroke.

1 | Recognize the risk factors.

Because a stroke results from impaired circulation to the brain, it shares many of the characteristics of other cardiovascular diseases. For example, high blood pressure is the top risk factor for stroke, and the study above found blood pressure increases more in women than in men during mid-life. Cholesterol levels also may rise more quickly for women within this age range. And inflammation leaves you more vulnerable to blood vessel problems such as stroke.

High blood sugar is another concern. "There's a large gray zone of blood sugar levels that are not in the diabetic range (126 mg/dl or higher) but that still put you at risk for damage to blood vessels," says Stephen Devries, MD, a preventive cardiologist at the Center for Integrative Medicine at Northwestern University. Anything over 100 mg/dl (the cutoff point for prediabetes) has the potential to cause problems, he explains.

In addition, researchers suspect that increased abdominal obesity is a major reason for the recent stroke surge in women. Fat deposits in the belly are more dangerous than extra weight carried



"You can greatly lower your risk by keeping your cholesterol, blood pressure, and blood sugar levels normal."

elsewhere on the body, and abdominal obesity appears to be a stronger risk factor for stroke in women than in men.

2 | Get tested. "This really speaks to the power of prevention," Dr. Devries says. In middle age, monitor your health closely and don't postpone identifying, and then minimizing, your risk factors. First, request some simple tests from your physician. The tests should check your blood pressure, cholesterol profile, sugar level (glucose), and high-sensitivity C-reactive protein (hs-CRP), a blood marker for inflammation in the body.

If you have a family history of heart disease or stroke, additional blood work can be helpful, including tests for the size and number of cholesterol particles (smaller particles are more dangerous and may increase the risk of a cholesterol level that otherwise appears normal); Lp(a), a sticky, inherited form of cholesterol; and homocysteine, an amino acid linked to a higher risk of cardiovascular disease.

3 | Practice prevention. Once you know your problem areas, you can strategically lower your risk. I advise everyone to exercise regularly because it can address all the factors that contribute to cardiovascular disease. Aim for 30 minutes of aerobic activity at least five days a week. Strength training that involves heavy lifting can further elevate blood pressure, so check with your doctor before beginning this type of regimen.

Dietary changes can also make you less susceptible to stroke. Studies show that lowering your sodium intake and eating foods high in potassium, vitamin C, folic acid, and fiber can slash stroke risk. You can meet all of these recommendations by eating an anti-inflammatory diet that emphasizes healthy fats, avoids refined and processed foods, and is plentiful in fresh vegetables and fruits. "Fresh produce is the best medicine you can buy," according to Dr. Devries.

Tobacco and alcohol play a role too. Smokers double their risk of the most common type of stroke, so if you smoke, kick the habit. Other studies have found that moderate alcohol consumption (no more than one drink a day for women and two a day for men) may cut stroke risk up to 33 percent.

To help protect your blood vessels, Dr. Devries also suggests taking a good-quality multivitamin and eating at least two fish meals a week. In addition, I advise taking 2 to 3 grams of fish oil daily. I also recommend talking to your doctor about taking aspirin, which can help prevent blood clots that may cause stroke. Finally, emotional stress can worsen many cardiovascular risk factors: Try relaxation techniques such as biofeedback, breath work, meditation, and yoga to keep your stress levels in check.

For more, see *The Healthy Heart Kit* by Andrew Weil, MD, Stephen Devries, MD, and others (Sounds True, 2008). To order, call (888) 3DR-WEIL.