All About Stroke

Toolkit No. 21

What is a stroke?

A stroke, sometimes called a "brain attack," occurs when the blood supply to part of your brain is interrupted and brain tissue is damaged. The most common cause is a blocked blood vessel. Stroke can cause physical problems such as paralysis, problems with thinking or speaking, and emotional problems.

What does diabetes have to do with strokes?

If you have diabetes, you're much more likely to have a stroke, heart disease, or a heart attack. In fact, 2 out of 3 people with diabetes die from stroke or heart disease. But you can cut your chances of having these problems by taking special care of your heart and blood vessels.

How do I know whether I'm at high risk for a stroke?

Just having diabetes puts you at risk, but your risk is even greater if

- you have high blood pressure
- you have abnormal blood cholesterol levels
- you smoke
- you've already had a stroke or a transient ischemic attack (TIA), also called a mini-stroke
- you have a family history of stroke or TIAs

You can't change your family history, but taking care of your diabetes and the conditions that come with it can lower your chances of having a stroke. It's up to you.

How can I lower my risk of having a stroke?

You can lower your risk by keeping your blood glucose (sugar), blood pressure, and cholesterol on target with meal planning, physical activity, and medication. Quitting smoking is important too. Every step you take will help. The closer your numbers are to your targets, the better your chances of preventing a stroke.

It's wise to review the symptoms of a stroke with family and friends and to tell them about the importance of calling 911.

What are the warning signs of a stroke?

Typical warning signs of a stroke develop suddenly and can include

- weakness or numbness on one side of your body
- sudden confusion or trouble understanding
- trouble talking
- dizziness, loss of balance, or trouble walking
- trouble seeing out of one or both eyes
- double vision
- severe headache

Sometimes one or more of these warning signs occur but then disappear. That condition, called a TIA, occurs when blood flow is temporarily blocked. It means you may be at risk for a future stroke.

If you have warning signs of a stroke, call 911 right away. Getting treatment can help prevent permanent damage to your brain. It's wise to review the symptoms of a stroke with family and friends and to tell them about the importance of calling 911.

How is a stroke diagnosed?

A number of tests may be done if a stroke is suspected:

- **Your doctor will examine you** to check for any changes in body function. For example, the doctor can check your ability to move your arms and legs. The doctor also will check brain functions such as your ability to read or to describe a picture.
- A **CT** or **MRI** (magnetic resonance imaging) uses special scanning techniques to provide images of the brain.
- An **ECG** (electrocardiogram) provides information on heart rate and rhythm.
- An **ultrasound examination** can show problems in the carotid (ca-RAH-tid) arteries, which carry blood from the heart to the brain.
- A **cerebral** (seh-REEB-rahl) **arteriogram** is a test in which a catheter is inserted into an artery and positioned in the neck. Dye is injected and X rays show whether arteries are narrowed or blocked.

What are the treatments for stroke?

Treatment you need right away

"Clot-busting" drugs must be given within hours after a stroke to minimize damage. That's why it's important to call 911 if you're having symptoms.

Surgical treatments you may need

Several options for surgical treatment of blocked blood vessels are available. These include

- **Carotid artery surgery,** also called **carotid endarterectomy** (en-dar-teh-REK-teh-mee) is used to remove buildups of fat inside the artery and to restore blood flow to the brain.
- **Carotid stenting** is a procedure used to remove a blockage in a blood vessel to the brain. A small tube with a balloon attached is threaded into the narrowed or blocked blood vessel. Then the balloon is inflated, opening the narrowed artery. A wire tube, or stent, may be left in place to help keep the artery open.

Other treatments

Treatment following a stroke includes rehabilitation therapies to restore function or help people relearn skills. Physical, occupational, and speech therapy may be included, as well as psychological counseling. Steps to prevent future problems should include smoking cessation, meal planning, physical activity, and medications to manage blood glucose, blood pressure, and cholesterol levels.

Real-Life Stories from People with Diabetes

I never knew I was at risk for a stroke. But after I had my stroke, I learned that having diabetes puts you at high risk for both a stroke and a heart attack, because diabetes can damage your blood vessels. Now I'm getting my blood glucose, blood pressure, and cholesterol under control so I can avoid another stroke.

Luis Z., age 75 • type 2 diabetes

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