

Protect your head: 5 simple steps to prevent a stroke

May is Stroke Awareness Month, an appropriate time to learn the warning signs of stroke and strategies you can use to avoid having one. According to 2008 data available through the National Stroke Association and published in the journal *Circulation*, stroke strikes an astonishing 780,000 people each year, which is one person every 40 seconds. African-Americans have a risk for a first-ever stroke that is almost twice that of Caucasians and each year about 60,000 more women than men suffer a stroke.

The good news is: 80% of all strokes are preventable, according to the National Stroke Association. Learn and apply the 5 simple steps for preventing stroke:

Don't smoke. If you smoke, quitting is one of the most important things you can do to decrease your chances of a stroke. Puffing on tobacco sets the stage for a stroke in many ways. It's linked to accumulation of plaque in your carotid arteries, which supply blood to your brain. Blockage in these arteries is the leading cause of stroke. The nicotine in the tobacco raises your blood pressure. The carbon monoxide from smoking lowers the amount of oxygen that your blood can carry to your brain, and smoking makes your blood more likely to clot. Blood clots in an artery that supplies blood to your brain can trigger a stroke. If you smoke, talk to your doctor about medications and programs that can help you stop.

2. Trim down. Being overweight is associated with many factors that raise your risk of a stroke. You're more likely to have high blood pressure. You're more likely to have high cholesterol, which

In addition to making healthy lifestyle changes, and participating in preventive vascular screenings, it is also important to be aware of the signs of stroke. Time is of the utmost importance when responding to stroke and the faster treatment can be obtained; the more likely the stroke sufferer is to have a stronger recovery. Being able to recognize the signs of stroke can greatly reduce its negative impact. Stroke affects one side of the brain, and can render an individual incapable of operating both sides of the body at one time. If you suspect that someone is having a stroke, follow these guideline and act FAST.

Face

Ask the person to smile.

Does one side of the face droop?

Arms

Ask the person to raise both arms.

Does one arm drift downward?

Speech

Ask the person to repeat a simple sentence.

Are the words slurred? Can he/she repeat the sentence correctly?

Time

If the person shows any of these symptoms, time is crucial.

Call 911 or get to a hospital FAST, brain cells are dying.

is an ingredient in plaque in your arteries, and you're more likely to develop type 2 diabetes. Doctors typically determine whether patients are too heavy by their body mass index (BMI), which uses a formula combining your height and weight. Ideally, your BMI should be less than 25. You can easily calculate your BMI online by visiting the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/bmi/index.htm.

Get moving. If you don't do much physical activity, you have a higher risk of developing high blood pressure, high cholesterol and diabetes. Even if you're at a healthy weight, it's still important to exercise regularly. If you're overweight, more activity will help you shed the extra pounds. Go for at least 30 minutes of physical activity on most days. If you can't do it all at once, it's OK to break up your activity into smaller chunks.

Prevent or control diabetes. Diabetes can damage the blood vessels in your brain and elsewhere in your body; most people with diabetes die of some form of cardiovascular disease. If you already have diabetes, maintaining good blood sugar control through weight loss, physical activity and, possibly, taking medications can help reduce your risk of stroke. If you don't have diabetes, regular physical activity and keeping a healthy weight will help you avoid it.

Eat a good diet. Loading up your plate with fruits, vegetables and grains, and cutting down on foods high in sodium, cholesterol and saturated fat, is also an important component in a stroke-preventing lifestyle. Sources of fat to avoid include fatty meats, full-fat dairy and baked snack foods containing partially hydrogenated oils. Keep your consumption of sodium below 2,400 milligrams a day, which is equal to about one teaspoon of salt. This daily amount includes all salt and sodium in your foods, not just salt you add. This type of diet will help you maintain a healthier blood pressure and lower cholesterol.

One other prevention technique to consider is screening. Many individuals who are at risk for stroke are unaware of their risk. Only 15% of strokes are preceded by a Transient Ischemic Attack, (TIA), or a mini-stroke, which means the vast majority appear with no or only vague symptoms. Preventive health screenings using painless ultrasound can detect previously unknown risk factors such as blocked arteries early enough for a physician to begin preventive procedures, possibly avoiding a stroke or heart attack. Consult your doctor about screening and seek out community based screening programs available throughout the Chicago area.

There are a number of Chicago area hospitals which sponsor stroke screenings: Ingalls Memorial Hospital, Provena St. Mary's Hospital, Elmhurst Memorial Hospital and Northwest Community Hospital in Arlington Heights. For more information, call: 1-800-697-9721 or visit www.lifelinescreening.com. To learn more about stroke and how to get involved with Stroke Awareness Month log onto: www.stroke.org or visit www.vascularweb.org to learn more about vascular disease and its treatment. **-CWM**



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