



Risk factors for stroke

There are two types of stroke.

- An **ischemic stroke** occurs when a blood clot blocks a blood vessel in the brain.
- A **hemorrhagic stroke** occurs when a blood vessel bursts and blood leaks into the brain.

They both cause similar damage to the brain by limiting blood flow preventing oxygen and nutrients from getting to brain cells.

A risk factor is anything that increases your chance of having a stroke. Some risk factors you can control; others you can't. These are the factors you cannot control:

- **Age** – You can have a stroke at any age, but your risk goes up as you get older.
- **Ethnicity** – African-Americans are at highest risk for stroke. One reason for this is sickle cell disease; a blood condition that narrows the arteries. One in every 500 African-Americans is born with this disease.
- **Gender** – Men are at higher risk for stroke than women.
- **Family history** – If your family members have health conditions that can lead to stroke, such as high blood pressure or high cholesterol, it can increase your chance of having those conditions and stroke as well.

Now for the factors you can control. You can lower your overall risk of having a stroke by making healthy choices such as:

- Not smoking
- Eating right
- Staying active
- Maintaining a healthy weight
- Taking control of any existing medical problems

Please remember that your family history (genetics) still can play a part in some of the risk factors listed here, but your own good health choices can go a long way in protecting you from these conditions.

If you already have any of the below conditions, please work closely with your doctor to manage your health, and follow the plan of care and medication directions your doctor suggests.

High blood pressure (also called hypertension)

When your blood pressure is too high it pushes harder than it should on the walls of your arteries. Certain things can increase your blood pressure including smoking, eating too much salt (sodium) and drinking too much alcohol. Stress can also affect your blood pressure.

High cholesterol

If cholesterol gets too high in your blood, it causes plaque to build up on your artery walls. This can block the flow of blood to your brain and cause a stroke.

Heart disorders

Common heart conditions (coronary artery disease, valve defects, irregular heartbeat and enlarged heart chambers) can increase a person's chance of having a stroke because they can cause blood vessel blockage or clots.

Diabetes

People with diabetes have a higher risk of stroke. And if they have a stroke, it can be worse because of their diabetes. Diabetes means high blood sugar, and this is often found along with high blood pressure and high cholesterol. All of these conditions increase the chance for stroke.

Overweight and obesity

When a person weighs too much it can lead to health conditions such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol and diabetes. All of these conditions increase the chance of stroke.

Transient ischemic attacks (TIAs)

People who have had a stroke before have more chance of having another one. TIAs are also known as "mini strokes," and people who have had a TIA also have more chance of having a regular stroke. Taking care of your health can help lower your chances of having another stroke in the future.

**To learn more about stroke, speak to your doctor, or visit [anthem.com](https://www.anthem.com).
(Please register if you haven't yet.)**

Sources:
National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke website: *Questions and Answers about Stroke* (accessed March 2013): [ninds.nih.gov](https://www.ninds.nih.gov).
Know Stroke website: *Stroke Materials* (accessed March 2013): [stroke.nih.gov](https://www.stroke.nih.gov).
Centers of Disease Control and Prevention website: *Stroke* (accessed March 2013): [cdc.gov/stroke](https://www.cdc.gov/stroke).
Sickle Cell Disease Association of America, Inc. website home page (accessed March 2013): [sicklecelldisease.org](https://www.sicklecelldisease.org).

This information is meant to be educational. It should not be interpreted as medical advice. Please talk to your doctor about changes that may affect your health.

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