

Strokes are the third leading killer in America and they can happen to anyone, including you.

# Reduce Your Risk Factors for Stroke

Written by Board Certified Internal Medicine Physician  
**Daniel Megard, MD**



Are you aware of the warning signs associated with stroke? Are you increasing your risk factors for a stroke without knowing it? Even though strokes are more typically associated with those over 65, they can occur at any age. Knowing more about types of strokes, risk factors and warning signs are important steps toward caring for your health and the health of your family members.

By definition, a stroke or “brain attack” occurs when blood circulation to the brain fails. There are two main categories of strokes, those caused by a blockage of blood flow and those caused by bleeding. Eighty percent of strokes are related to

blockage of a blood vessel and are called ischemic strokes.

There are three subtypes of ischemic stroke. A thrombus is the formation of a clot within a blood vessel, an embolism is the movement of a clot from another part of the body to the neck or brain, and lastly stenosis is a severe narrowing of an artery in or leading to the brain.

While the definitions of types and subtypes of strokes are worth knowing, there are also important warning signs to recognize that can signal the onset of stroke. Warning signs of a stroke may include sudden numbness or weakness of the face, arm, or leg. They may also include sudden confusion and difficulty speaking or understanding, sudden change in vision, sudden change in balance or ability to walk, or a sudden severe headache.

Another type of stroke to be aware of is a transient ischemic attack (TIA). Also called a “mini-stroke,” a TIA might last only a few moments, or up to twenty-four hours, and then disappear. A TIA might include less dramatic symptoms and be of shorter

duration than a stroke, but should be taken seriously.

In the event a stroke occurs, your physician will make a diagnosis using various techniques. In addition to taking a detailed patient history, a neurological examination is usually helpful. Diagnostic testing using various radiography (x-ray) images are helpful and your physician may order a CT scan, MRI scan, a Doppler ultrasound, or an arteriogram.

While its important to understand what a stroke is, and know it’s warning signs, the best possible pathway to health is actually knowing the risk factors for stroke and doing your best to prevent one from striking in the first place.

By far the most potent risk factor for stroke is high blood pressure. Most people control their blood pressure by maintaining proper weight, avoiding drugs that raise blood pressure, cutting down on salt, increasing exercise, and by taking medication prescribed by their doctor.

Another risk factor is cigarette smoking – a factor that has been linked to build-up of plaque in arteries. Cigarette smoke also makes your blood thicker and more



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likely to clot, and carbon monoxide from the cigarette reduces the amount of oxygen your blood can carry to the brain. Nicotine also raises blood pressure, thereby increasing your risk.

As mentioned earlier, an embolism is another type of stroke involving a clot. Heart disease such as coronary artery disease, valve problems, irregular heart rhythms and heart enlargement may lead to an embolism that could go to the brain. Since aspirin or warfarin may help reduce your risk for clots if you have heart disease, you should talk to your doctor to

see if you are a candidate for one of these medications.

Yet another risk factor for stroke is diabetes. Unmanaged diabetes can especially complicate the impact of a stroke since brain damage is usually more severe when blood sugar levels are high at the onset of a stroke. Keeping blood sugar levels normal or near normal through self-regulation can be a critical step for diabetes patients.

Other risk factors to know include history of TIA, heavy alcohol consumption, high cholesterol levels, illicit drug usage, and a

family history of stroke. African-American patients are at higher risk for stroke, and women are at higher risk during pregnancy, childbirth, and menopause.

Stroke is a devastating illness that we all want to avoid. If you've experienced any of the stroke warning signs mentioned above, please see your physician. He or she may be able to significantly reduce your risk of stroke through medication, risk factor modification, lifestyle changes, or surgery. If you think you might be having a stroke, dial 9-1-1 or have someone immediately take you to the nearest emergency room.

***For more information or to schedule an appointment please call 605-665-1152.***