

Keep your stroke risks low with regular checkups and treatment for these conditions if you have them.

HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE

If you have high blood pressure (or hypertension), know your numbers and keep them low. High blood pressure is the leading cause of stroke and the most significant controllable risk factor for stroke. Many scientists attribute our current decline in stroke-related deaths to the successful treatment of high blood pressure. [Manage HBP](#).

SMOKING

If you smoke cigarettes, take steps to stop. Recent studies confirm that cigarette smoking is another crucial risk factor for stroke. The nicotine and carbon monoxide in cigarette smoke damage the cardiovascular system and pave the way for a stroke to occur. Additionally, the use of birth control pills combined with cigarette smoking can greatly increase the risk of stroke. [Quit smoking now and lower risks](#). [Downloadable PDF](#).

DIABETES

If you have diabetes (Type 1 or 2), keep blood sugar controlled. [Diabetes Mellitus](#) is an independent risk factor for stroke. Many people with diabetes also have high blood pressure, high blood cholesterol and are overweight. This increases their risk even more. While diabetes is treatable, the presence of the disease still increases your risk of stroke. Learn how to lower risks with diabetes and pre-diabetes. [Statistics on diabetes and cardiovascular risks](#).

DIET

If your diet is poor, eat foods that improve your heart and brain health. Diets high in saturated fat, trans fat and cholesterol can raise blood cholesterol levels. Diets high in sodium (salt) can increase blood pressure. Diets with high calories can lead to obesity. Also, a diet containing five or more servings of fruits and vegetables per day may reduce the risk of stroke. [Learn how you can eat better](#).

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

If you're physically inactive, starting moving and being more active. Physical inactivity can increase your risk of stroke, heart disease, becoming overweight, developing high blood pressure, high blood cholesterol and diabetes, heart disease and stroke. So go on a brisk walk, take the stairs, and do whatever you can to make your life more active. Try to get a total of at least 30 minutes of activity on most or all days. [Learn how to move more and get active](#).

OBESITY

If you're obese or overweight, take steps to get your body mass into a healthy range. Excess body weight and obesity are linked with an increased risk of high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease and stroke. Losing as little as 5 to 10 pounds can make a significant difference in your risks. Even if weight control has been a lifelong challenge, start by taking small steps today to [manage your weight and lower risks](#).

HIGH BLOOD CHOLESTEROL

If you have high blood cholesterol, get it under control. People with [high blood cholesterol](#) have an increased risk for stroke. Large amounts of cholesterol in the blood can build up and cause blood clots, leading to a stroke. Also, it appears that low HDL ("good") cholesterol is a risk factor for stroke in men, but more data is needed to verify if this is true for women as well. [Take control of your cholesterol.](#)

CAROTID ARTERY DISEASE

If you have carotid artery disease or other artery disease, get treatment to lower your risks. The carotid arteries in your neck supply blood to your brain. A carotid artery narrowed by fatty deposits from [atherosclerosis](#) (plaque buildups in artery walls) may become blocked by a blood clot. Because they're located so close to the brain, carotid arteries may more easily cause a stroke, but any artery disease may contribute to a stroke.

PERIPHERAL ARTERY DISEASE

If you have peripheral artery disease or PAD, get treatment to lower your risks. [PAD](#) is the narrowing of blood vessels carrying blood to leg and arm muscles. It's caused by fatty buildups of plaque in artery walls. People with peripheral artery disease have a higher risk of carotid artery disease, which raises their risk of stroke.

ATRIAL FIBRILLATION

If you have atrial fibrillation (AFib), know your AFib-Stroke risks and keep them low. [AFib \(a heart rhythm disorder\)](#) increases stroke risks fivefold. That's because it causes the heart's upper chambers to beat incorrectly, which can allow the blood pool and clot to travel to the brain and cause a stroke. A resulting clot can travel to the brain and cause a stroke. If you have AFib, [know your stroke risks](#). If you're at risk, get treatment to keep risks low. Also, [sleep apnea](#) can be linked to AFib and is associated with increased stroke risks.

OTHER HEART DISEASE

If you have other heart disease, manage related conditions and work with your healthcare provider. People who have [coronary heart disease or heart failure](#) are at higher risk of stroke than people who have healthy hearts. [Dilated cardiomyopathy](#) (an enlarged heart), [heart valve disease](#) and some types of [congenital heart defects](#) can also raise the risk of stroke.

SICKLE CELL DISEASE

If you have sickle cell disease (also called sickle cell anemia), seek treatment early. This treatable genetic disorder mainly affects African-American and Hispanic children. "Sickled" red blood cells are less able to carry oxygen to the body's tissues and organs. These cells also tend to stick to blood vessel walls, which can block arteries to the brain and cause a stroke. [Learn more.](#)

You can't control some risk factors, but knowing that they exist may help motivate you to work harder on the ones you can change.

Age matters. The likelihood of having a stroke nearly doubles every 10 years after age 55. Although stroke is more common among the elderly, a lot of people under 65 also have strokes. [Even babies and children can sometimes have a stroke.](#)

A family history of stroke can raise your risk. If your parent, grandparent, sister or brother has had a stroke — especially before reaching age 65 — you may be at greater risk. Sometimes strokes are caused by genetic disorders like [CADASIL](#), which can block blood flow in the brain.

Race can make a difference. Statistics show that African-Americans have a much higher risk of death from a stroke than Caucasians do. This is partly because blacks have higher risks of high blood pressure, diabetes and obesity. Visit our [Empowered to Serve](#) program to learn more. [Hispanics and latinos](#) also have unique risks for stroke.

Your sex (gender) can affect your risks. Each year, women have more strokes than men, and stroke kills more women than men, too. [Factors that may increase stroke risks for women include:](#) pregnancy, history of preeclampsia/eclampsia or gestational diabetes, oral contraceptive use (especially when combined with smoking) and post-menopausal hormone therapy. Be sure to discuss your specific risks with your doctor.

Prior stroke, TIA or heart attack can raise your risk. [A person who has had a prior stroke](#) has a much higher risk of having another stroke than a person who has never had one. [Transient ischemic attacks \(TIAs\) or](#) are also strong predictors of stroke. TIAs are smaller, temporary blockages in the brain that can produce milder forms of stroke-like symptoms but may not leave lasting damage. A person who's had one or more TIAs is almost 10 times more likely to have a stroke than someone of the same age and sex who hasn't. Recognizing and treating TIAs can reduce your risk of a major stroke. TIA should be considered a medical emergency and followed up immediately with a healthcare professional. If you've had a prior heart attack, you're at higher risk of having a stroke, too. A heart attack is a plaque buildup that causes blockages in the blood vessels to the heart. Similarly, most strokes are caused by buildups of plaque that cause blockages in the brain.

Geographic location can make a difference. Strokes are more common in the southeastern United States than in other areas. These are the so-called "stroke belt" states. [Check out your state](#) and consider how it supports healthy habits.

Socioeconomic factors may have an impact. There's some evidence that strokes are more common among those with lower incomes. One reason may be because smoking and obesity rates are also higher. Another reason may be that [access to quality healthcare](#) is often more limited at lower income levels. [Support quality healthcare for all.](#)

Alcohol abuse can raise risk multiple. In fact, it can lead to medical complications, including stroke. If you drink alcohol, we recommend no more than two drinks per day for men and no more than one drink per day for non-pregnant women, based on current evidence for lowering stroke risk. [See recommendations](#). As always, pregnant women are advised to abstain from alcohol. Speak with your doctor or a local support group if you need help overcoming addiction to alcohol.

Drug abuse is associated with increased risk. The most commonly abused drugs, including cocaine, amphetamines and heroin, [have been associated with an increased risk of stroke](#). Drug addiction is often a chronic relapsing disorder associated with a number of societal and health-related problems. Strokes caused by drug abuse are often seen in a younger population. Steer clear of potentially addicting substances and see a doctor if you need support for overcoming substance abuse.

Sleep habits can affect stroke risk factors. [Recent studies](#) have begun to clarify the reasons that people who get regular, good quality sleep tend to have lower heart disease and stroke risks. Adopt habits that promote healthy sleep patterns.

Whether your risks are related to changeable factors or are primarily outside of your control, you can benefit your heart and your brain with healthy lifestyle choices.