

Stroke prevention starts with smart lifestyle choices

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Every year in the United States, more than 600,000 people have a new stroke and 130,000 of those strokes are fatal. The American Heart Association states more than 795,000 people in the US have a stroke in a year. Stroke accounts for approximately 1 of every 19 deaths in the United States. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, up to 80% of strokes could be prevented through controlling the health conditions that raise your risk for stroke.

"Anyone - including children - can have a stroke," said Dr. Nathan McIntosh, medical director of Merit Health River Oaks Emergency Department. "And, while it's true certain factors like age, sex, race and family history are beyond our control, there are a number of lifestyle choices we can make to vastly reduce the number of tragic stroke-related fatalities."

The good news is most of the health and lifestyle choices needed to reduce risk of stroke will also significantly reduce the risk of heart disease and cancer, while enhancing overall health and quality of life.

So why wait to get started? Here is a priority checklist:

- **Control your blood pressure.** High blood pressure is the leading cause of stroke, and its most controllable risk factor. If blood pressure can't be managed through diet and stress-reduction, talk with doctor for the right medicine.

- **Stop smoking.** Nicotine and carbon monoxide in cigarette smoke damage the cardiovascular system and pave the way for a stroke to occur. Use of birth control pills combined with cigarette smoking can increase the risk of stroke even further.

- **Prevent or control diabetes.** Diabetes (both I and II) is an independent risk factor for stroke. If a person is diabetic, the blood sugar and A1C levels should be checked regularly and keep those numbers in a healthy range.

- **Use food as preventive medicine.** A diet can make or break the risk of a stroke over time. Eating five or more servings of fruits and vegetables per day can reduce the risk of stroke. Minimize sodium, saturated fat and trans-fat and keep calories in a healthy range.

- **Manage cholesterol levels.** Large amounts of cholesterol in the blood can build up and cause blood clots, leading to a stroke. If the numbers are not



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in range with diet changes, talk with a doctor about whether medication is the right choice.

- **Atrial fibrillation (AFib) treatment.** AFib increases stroke risks five-fold because it causes the heart's upper chambers to beat incorrectly, which can allow the blood to pool and clot, then travel to the brain and cause a stroke. With AFib, know the stroke risks and get treatment to keep them as low as possible.

- **Physical inactivity and weight control.** Both physical inactivity and excess body weight can increase the risk of high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes, heart disease and stroke. So go on a brisk walk, take the stairs, and do everything possible to be active. If BMI is over 25, make losing at least 5-10 pounds a priority this year.

- **Other medical conditions.** If it's sleep apnea, sickle cell disease, alco-

hol or drug abuse, peripheral or carotid artery disease, or any other disease of the heart or blood vessels, talk with a physician regularly about the impact of these conditions on the risk of stroke, and how to best manage it.

Transient ischemic attacks (TIAs) are also strong predictors of stroke. TIAs are smaller, temporary blockages in the brain that can produce milder stroke-like symptoms but may not leave lasting damage.

"Someone who has had one or more TIAs is almost TEN TIMES more likely to have a stroke than someone of similar age who hasn't," said Dr. McIntosh. "Recognizing and treating TIAs is critical to avoiding a major stroke. TIAs should be considered a medical emergency, and the patient should follow up immediately with a neurologist."

Perhaps most importantly, the key to avoiding stroke-related death is to get the patient treatment F.A.S.T. The FAST acronym is a helpful reminder to look for Face drooping, Arm weakness, Slurred speech - Time to call 9-1-1. Other symptoms can include sudden and severe headache pain, confusion, numbness of arms or legs, and loss of vision. Treatment must be administered quickly to avoid irreversible damage, so if in any doubt at all - call 9-1-1.


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