Prevent a first stroke

A stroke occurs when brain cells die because they are not getting enough blood, or when a blood vessel bleeds into the brain. About 80% of strokes are caused by the blockage of an artery in the neck or brain (ischemic stroke) and the rest are caused by bleeding into or around the brain (hemorrhagic stroke).

Stroke is the leading cause of adult disability and the third leading cause of death in the United States.

One of the most important steps you can take to lower your risk of death or disability from stroke is to control the risk factors that can lead to stroke. A team of stroke experts reporting in the March 24/31, 1999, issue of JAMA emphasized the substantial public health concern of stroke and issued up-to-date recommendations for primary care physicians to prevent a first stroke in their patients. Talk to your doctor about how best to protect yourself.

**How to prevent stroke:**

- Check your blood pressure often. If it is consistently high (>140/90 mm Hg), work with your doctor to keep it under control.
- If you have atrial fibrillation, diabetes, or high cholesterol, work with your doctor to manage these conditions.
- If you smoke, stop.
- If you drink, do so only in moderation.
- Make regular exercise an important part of your daily activities.

**Stoke risk factors:**

If you have any of the following conditions, it is important to work closely with your doctor to treat them so that they do not lead to more serious medical problems, such as stroke:

- High blood pressure (hypertension) is the leading cause of stroke
- Narrowed artery channels (atherosclerosis), especially partially blocked arteries that carry blood to the brain (carotid artery stenosis)
- Heart disease, such as irregular heart beat (atrial fibrillation), high cholesterol (high level of fats in the blood), or heart attack (myocardial infarction).
- Lifestyle factors, such as cigarette smoking, excessive alcohol use, lack of physical activity, and a diet deficient in fruits and vegetables can increase your risk of stroke.
- Complications from diabetes can increase your risk of stroke
- Brief episodes of stroke warning signs (transient ischemic attacks)

**For more information:**

- National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke
  800/352-9424 or www.ninds.nih.gov
- National Stroke Association
  800/STROKES or www.stroke.org
- American Heart Association
  Stroke Connection “warmline” 800/553-6321 or www.americanheart.org

**Get help immediately if:**

If you think that you or someone you know is having a stroke, seek immediate medical help by calling an emergency number such as 911, for ambulance transportation to a hospital emergency department. Seeking immediate medical attention is essential because some stroke therapies work only if the patient is diagnosed and treated in a relatively short time frame. Warning signs of a stroke include any of the following:

- Sudden numbness or weakness of face, arm or leg, especially on one side of the body
- Sudden confusion, trouble speaking or understanding
- Sudden trouble seeing in 1 or both eyes
- Sudden trouble walking, dizziness, loss of balance or coordination
- Sudden severe headache with no known cause

**Inform yourself:**

To find this and previous JAMA Patient Pages, check out the AMA’s Web site at www.ama-assn.org/consumer.htm. Previous JAMA Patient Pages on stroke were published on September 23/30, 1998, and April 22/29, 1998.