

## RISK FACTORS FOR STROKE

Some stroke risk factors are hereditary. Others are a function of natural processes. Still others result from a person's lifestyle. You can't change factors related to heredity or natural processes, but those resulting from lifestyle or environment can be modified with the help of a healthcare professional.

### What risk factors for stroke can't be changed?

- **Age** - The chance of having a stroke more than doubles for each decade of life after age 55. While stroke is common among the elderly, a lot of people under 65 also have strokes.
- **Race** - African Americans have a much higher risk of death and disability from a stroke than whites, in part because blacks have a greater incidence of high blood pressure.
- **Sex (gender)** - Stroke is more common in men than in women. In most age groups, more men than women will have a stroke in a given year. However, more than half of total stroke deaths occur in women. At all ages, more women than men die of stroke. Use of birth control pills and pregnancy pose special stroke risks for women.
- **Diabetes mellitus** - Diabetes is an independent risk factor for stroke and is strongly correlated with high blood pressure. While diabetes is treatable, the presence of the disease still increases your risk of stroke.
- **Prior stroke** - The risk of stroke for someone who has already had one is many times that of a person who has not.
- **Heredity** - The chance of stroke is greater in people who have a family history of stroke.

### What stroke risk factors can be treated with the help of a healthcare professional?

- **High blood pressure** - High blood pressure is the most important controllable risk factor for stroke. Many people believe the effective treatment of high blood pressure is a key reason for the accelerated decline in the death rates for stroke.
- **Heart disease** - After high blood pressure, heart disease is the most important risk factor for stroke. Heart attack is also the major cause of death among stroke survivors.

- **Cigarette smoking** - In recent years, studies have shown cigarette smoking to be an important risk factor for stroke. The nicotine and carbon monoxide in cigarette smoke damage the cardiovascular system in many ways. The use of oral contraceptives combined with cigarette smoking greatly increases stroke risk.
- **Transient ischemic attacks (TIAs)** - TIAs are strong predictors of stroke. 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.

### **What are other, less well-documented risk factors?**

- **Geographic location** - Strokes are more common in the southeastern United States than in other areas. These are the so-called "stroke belt" states.
- **Socioeconomic factors** - There's some evidence that strokes are more common among low-income people than among more affluent people.
- **Excessive alcohol intake** - More than two drinks per day raises blood pressure. Binge drinking can lead to stroke.
- **Certain kinds of drug abuse** - Intravenous drug abuse carries a high risk of stroke from cerebral embolisms. Cocaine use has been closely related to stroke, heart attacks and a variety of other cardiovascular complications. These events have been fatal even in first-time cocaine users.

### **How are heart disease risk factors related to stroke?**

Some controllable risk factors for heart disease are secondary risk factors for stroke. By reducing your risk factors for heart disease, you also reduce your risk of stroke. These controllable risk factors include:

- High blood cholesterol and lipids
- Physical inactivity
- Obesity

### **Remember!**

- Know the warning signs!
- Stroke is a medical emergency!
- Respond quickly and call 9-1-1!