

How to prevent a stroke

**What you can do to help prevent
a stroke from happening**

Together we can take action on stroke

Need to talk? Call our confidential Stroke Helpline on **0303 3033 100**.

You may find our other leaflets helpful too:

- **We're here for you**
- **What is a stroke?**
- **When a stroke happens**
- **Life after stroke**
- **The road to recovery**

We also have lots more useful information. To order leaflets and factsheets, or to find out more about stroke, please call **0303 3033 100**, email **info@stroke.org.uk** or visit us at **stroke.org.uk**

We are a charity. We rely on your support to change lives.

© Stroke Association 2012

The Stroke Association is a Company Limited by Guarantee, registered in England and Wales (No 61274). Registered office: Stroke Association House, 240 City Road, London EC1V 2PR. Registered as a Charity in England and Wales (No 211015) and in Scotland (SC037789). Also registered in Isle of Man (No 945), Jersey (NPO 369) and serving Northern Ireland.

Introduction

We believe that many strokes can be prevented. There are plenty of things that you can do to lower your chances of having a stroke. Although you cannot change some things - like your age - making simple lifestyle changes can prevent many strokes.

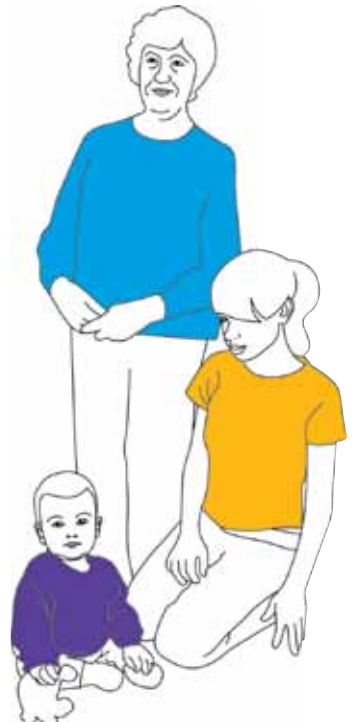
This leaflet explains why your lifestyle might be putting you at risk and how you can make **positive changes**, today.

In this leaflet, you can read about the following.

- **What is a stroke?** - page 4
- **Healthy eating** - page 6
- **Exercise** - page 8
- **Smoking** - page 9
- **Alcohol and drugs** - page 10
- **Medical conditions** - page 11
- **Women and stroke** - page 13
- **Things you can't change** - page 14
- **Preventing another stroke** - page 15

The hospital ran lots of tests and they saw I had suffered a series of TIAs (mini-strokes). I didn't think these things happened to young people.'

Claire Simpson was 23 when she had a stroke.



What is a stroke?

**Suspect a stroke?
Act FAST. Call 999**

F - Facial weakness:

Can the person smile?

A - Arm weakness:

Can the person raise both arms?

S - Speech problems:

Can the person speak clearly?

T - Time to call 999
if they have any of these signs.

A stroke is a brain attack. It happens when the **blood supply** to a part of your brain is **cut off** by:

- a blockage – (an ischaemic stroke), or
- a bleed – (a haemorrhagic stroke).

If this happens, your brain will not get the oxygen it needs and brain cells will begin to shut down and die. Dead brain cells do not recover but it is possible for other brain cells to take over – this is how recovery happens.

Because the **brain controls everything** you do, feel, think and remember, damage to the brain affects these abilities. The abilities affected depend on where the stroke happens in your brain.



Transient ischaemic attack

A transient ischaemic attack (TIA), often called a **mini-stroke**, happens when the brain's blood supply is interrupted for a brief time. The symptoms are very similar to a stroke but usually only last a few minutes or hours, and will disappear completely within 24 hours. **Never ignore a TIA** – it's a sign that something is wrong. Always **get medical help straight away**.

What causes a stroke?

A stroke happens when there is something wrong with your **blood flow** – your ‘vascular system’. The two major causes of this are:

- narrowing, ‘furring’, hardening or weakening of your blood vessels (arteries); or
- thickening of your blood.

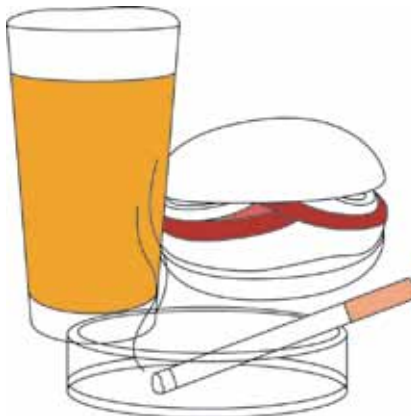
You are most likely to have a stroke if you are at risk of these conditions, for example, if you are an **older** person or if you have certain **medical problems**, like high blood pressure or diabetes.

Lifestyle factors, such as diet, drinking alcohol, taking drugs, smoking, and how active you are, also affect your risk.

Taking steps to **change** as many of the risk factors as you can, will help you **lower your risk** of stroke.

‘I had my stroke because I was overweight. I’ve since lost five stone. I eat salad and fruit every day, and walk a lot more. Since my stroke I’ve done two London Marathons.’

David Diston,
stroke survivor



Eating well

Eating well is essential for a healthy bloodstream.

A good diet can help you prevent stroke, heart disease and diabetes.



The main food groups

Choose a variety of foods from the main food groups:

- fruit and vegetables
- starchy foods like bread, cereals, pasta or potatoes
- meat, fish and protein alternatives
- dairy food such as milk, cheese and yoghurt, and
- fats and sugars (but don't eat too much of these).

Eat healthily

Snack on fruit and vegetables

Try not to fill up on junk food. Choose healthier options like fresh fruit, vegetables and dried fruit.

You should aim for at least **five portions of fruit and vegetables each day**. A portion is about 80 grams (three ounces) – for example, an apple or orange, a glass of orange juice, a large carrot, two broccoli florets, a handful of grapes or three tablespoons of peas.

Choose low-fat proteins

Cut down on red meat – choose fish, poultry (with the skin removed), game or vegetarian alternatives instead. Most red meat is high in saturated fat, which can be bad for your arteries.

Eat more fibre

Foods high in fibre help control blood fat levels. Try wholegrain cereals, porridge, brown rice, whole wheat bread and pasta, and grains such as couscous.

Reduce your salt

Salt raises blood pressure. Avoid processed and fast foods which contain a lot of salt. Eat fresh foods whenever you can and instead of adding salt to your food, try flavouring with herbs and spices.

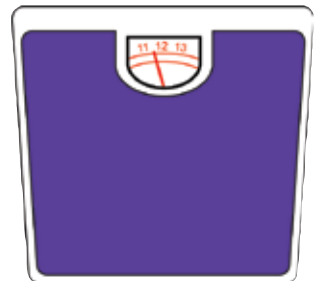
Limit the amount of fat you eat

You need some fat in your diet, but too much can clog up your arteries and add to weight problems. Try to limit the amount you use and stick to vegetable, seed and nut oils rather than margarine and butter.

Watch your weight

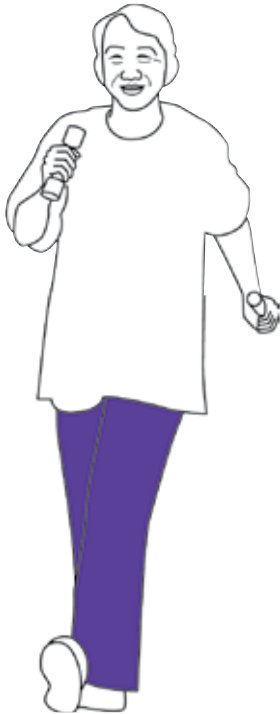
Being overweight puts you at risk of high blood pressure, heart disease and diabetes, all of which increase your risk of a stroke. To find out if you are a healthy weight for your height, visit your GP. **A healthy diet** and **regular exercise** will help you to lose or control your weight.

Why not contact us for more information about healthy eating and stroke to help get you started? Call us on **0303 3033 100** or visit **stroke.org.uk**



Do more exercise

Just a little bit of regular exercise can halve your risk of stroke. 30 minutes of activity five days a week is enough to reduce your risk. You don't have to do it all in one go – it is just as effective to exercise a few times a day in 10-, 15- or 20-minute sessions.



Regular physical activity helps to lower blood pressure, creates a healthy balance of blood fats and improves your body's ability to handle insulin.

Here are some tips to get you started:

- Pick an activity you enjoy like swimming or dancing - it doesn't matter what you do as long as it makes you feel warm and slightly out of breath.
- Don't over do it – build up gradually to 30 minutes a day.
- Warm up and cool down.
- Get an exercise partner.
- Be more active during the day – take the stairs instead of the lift or walk to the shops instead of driving.

If you haven't exercised for some time, especially if you're over 40 or have a medical condition, **get your doctor's advice before you start.** If you feel dizzy, have pain (especially in your chest) or you find it difficult to breath, stop exercising straight away and tell your doctor.



Stop smoking

Smoking causes your arteries to furr up (atherosclerosis) and makes your blood more likely to clot. This **doubles your risk of a stroke** and this risk will increase the more you smoke.

Stopping smoking will reduce your risk of a stroke (and other health conditions) – no matter how old you are or how long you have smoked. Giving up is not easy, but it is worth the effort to improve your health.

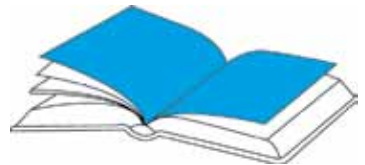
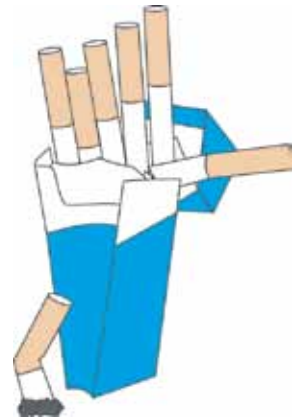
Lots of help is available to stop smoking

- Information packs from your local medical centre or library.
- Stop-smoking groups – your doctor may be able to refer you to one.
- Health service – for practical help and advice.
- Counselling – from charities such as Quit.
- Nicotine replacement therapy such as chewing gums, sprays and patches. (Nicotine may not be suitable for you if you have already had a stroke – ask your doctor for advice.)

Not smoking is one of the most important things you can do to avoid a stroke.

'My stroke was caused by excessive drinking and smoking. There were no warning signs and I had no idea how much damage I was doing to myself.'

Robert Washbrook was 61 when he had his stroke.



Drink sensibly

If you would like copies of our factsheets 'Alcohol and stroke' and 'Smoking and stroke', call us on **0303 3033 100**. They include many tips and useful contacts.



Drinking too much alcohol raises blood pressure. **Binge drinking** (drinking more than six units in six hours) is particularly dangerous as it can cause your blood pressure to soar. Try to **limit your alcohol to within the current guidelines**.

- Women should drink no more than two to three units of alcohol a day. (Women who are pregnant should not drink at all.)
- Men should drink no more than three to four units a day.
- It helps not to drink every day. Try to have a few alcohol-free days a week.

A unit of alcohol is a small glass of wine, a single pub measure of spirits or half a pint of weak beer or lager.

If you have problems controlling how much you drink, talk to your doctor.

Drugs

Some stimulant drugs like cocaine and amphetamines, or drugs that improve sports performance, can **damage blood vessels** and cause a sudden increase in blood pressure. This increases your risk of a stroke caused by a bleed.

Control medical conditions

A number of medical problems can increase your risk of a stroke. Ask your GP to help you control these conditions. These may include the following:

- **High blood pressure**

High blood pressure (hypertension) causes the arteries to furr up (atherosclerosis) and puts extra strain on the blood vessels. You may not know if you have high blood pressure, so you should have it checked regularly. A normal healthy adult blood pressure is less than 140/90mmHg.

- **High cholesterol**

Cholesterol is a type of fat produced by your liver. It is also found in foods like meat and dairy products. You need small amounts of it for a healthy body, but too much of it is unhealthy. Extra cholesterol can travel around the blood vessels in your body, narrowing your arteries and increasing your risk of stroke. Eating a healthy diet that's low in saturated fats can help to lower your cholesterol. Your doctor may advise you to take medicine too.

Men and women over 40 should have their cholesterol checked regularly.

Untreated high blood pressure (hypertension) is the biggest single risk factor for stroke. Lifestyle measures and the right medication can help reduce high blood pressure.



Control medical conditions

Doctors and other medical professionals can help you reduce your risk of a stroke – regular checks will highlight any underlying problems.



- **Diabetes**
Diabetes (both type 1 and type 2) is a major risk factor for stroke. It causes the blood vessels to become hardened and narrowed because of fatty deposits. If the narrowed blood vessels leading to your brain become completely blocked, you may have a stroke. This risk is increased if you have had diabetes for a long time and you have not been controlling it very well.
- **Atrial fibrillation (irregular heartbeat)**
When the heart beats irregularly, clots can form and travel to the brain, blocking an artery and causing a stroke. You are more likely to develop this condition if you are aged over 65. If you have atrial fibrillation, your risk of stroke is increased up to five times.
- **Heart disease**
Other problems like heart valve disease and heart attack can increase your risk of a stroke. Treatments and regular check ups will help to keep your risk as low as possible.

Your doctor can prescribe medication to help keep these conditions under control.

Stress and depression

Many things in life – like overwork, redundancy, family problems and bereavement – can lead to stress and depression. These take a physical toll on your body and if they are not treated, they can contribute to long-term health problems. It's important that you **get any help you need from your doctor or another health professional.**

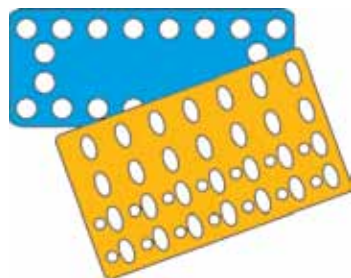
Risk factors for women

There are some things that can increase the risk of stroke for women. These are linked to the female sex hormone oestrogen, high levels of which can make blood more likely to clot. During **pregnancy** oestrogen levels naturally rise, but there are also hormone treatments that will cause it to rise, such as **contraceptive medicine** containing **oestrogen**, and **hormone replacement therapy (HRT)**.

Always discuss hormone treatments with your doctor and make a decision that is right for you.

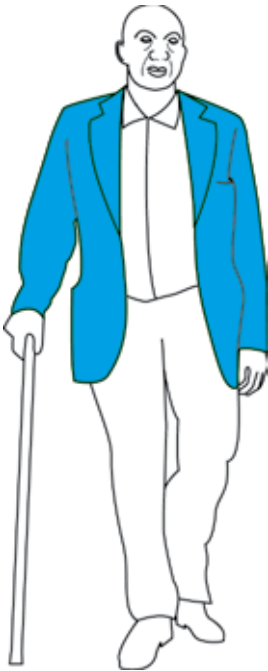
'People don't realise how life-changing a stroke is. It's especially devastating for a young man to have what is seen to be an elderly person's problem.'

Brad Francis was 29 when he had his first stroke. He had another two years later and lost both his sight and speech.



Be aware of the things you can't change

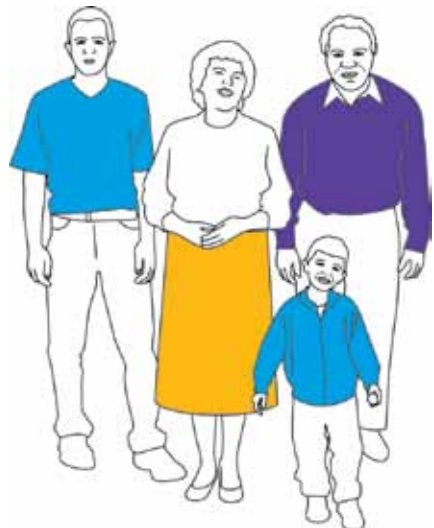
You are more likely to have a stroke again if you don't take steps to prevent it. Even after a stroke, it's not too late to change your lifestyle and improve your health.



Unfortunately, you may have an increased risk of a stroke because of things you can't change. These include:

- **family history** - you are more at risk if someone in your family has had a stroke;
- **age** - arteries harden and become furred up with age, which means older people are more likely to have a stroke;
- **gender** - in people under the age of 75, men have more strokes than women;
- **ethnic background** - if you are South Asian or African - Caribbean, you are more at risk; and
- **medical conditions** like heart disease and diabetes.

A stroke is not inevitable. Changing your lifestyle can help to reduce your risk.



It is never too late to change

Following the simple steps below can reduce your risk of another stroke and help you to take control of your health.

Preventing another stroke

Although your risk of having a stroke increases if you have already had a stroke or a TIA (mini-stroke) there are **positive things you can do** to reduce your risk of it happening again. It is important that you:

- take any medication your doctor prescribes;
- get regular health check ups to make sure it is working for you; and
- take your doctor's advice on lifestyle.

You may also have had an **operation** after your stroke to lower your risk of having another one, for example on the arteries in your neck, or within your brain after some types of bleed. Make sure you **follow your after-care advice**.

Useful contacts

Blood Pressure Association

www.bpassoc.org.uk
0845 241 0989

British Heart Foundation

www.bhf.org.uk
0300 330 3311

Diabetes UK

www.diabetes.org.uk
0845 120 2960

Drinkaware

www.drinkaware.co.uk
020 7766 9900

Quit

www.quitline.org.uk
0800 002 200



We are the Stroke Association

We believe in life after stroke. That's why we help stroke survivors make the best recovery they can. It's why we campaign for better stroke care. And why we fund research into new treatments and ways of preventing stroke.

We're here for you. If you'd like to know more please get in touch.

Stroke Helpline: 0303 3033 100

Website: stroke.org.uk

Email: info@stroke.org.uk

From a textphone: 18001 0303 3033 100

Produced by the Stroke Association's Information Service. For sources used, visit stroke.org.uk/information/our_publications

© Stroke Association
Leaflet 03, version 03 published
September 2010, updated April 2012,
(next review due December 2012).

Item code: **A01L03**

