

# Stay Healthy

## 5 WAYS TO PREVENT STROKE

Simple lifestyle changes make all the difference.

By Bobbi Dempsey

If you've ever worried that your family history suggests a stroke is in your future, there's good news: "Genetics do play a role, but less than most people might imagine," says Daniel Labovitz, M.D., director of the Stern Stroke Center at the New York-based Montefiore Medical Center. "Family history of stroke is only a mild risk factor. Just because your dad had a stroke doesn't mean that you will."

A much better indicator of your stroke risk? Your lifestyle choices. "For almost 20 years we've had strong evidence that eating vegetables and fresh fruit while minimizing processed foods and saturated and trans fats reduces risk of stroke and heart attack more than any pill a doctor can prescribe," Labovitz says. (And please stop smoking.)

With a stroke occurring every 40 seconds in the U.S. on average, everyone should take precautions. Here are five simple things you can do to significantly lower your risk.

**1. Get up to speed on the new blood pressure recommendations.** "High blood pressure is the No. 1 cause of stroke, so it's the most important risk factor to control," says Robyn Moore, CEO of the nonprofit National Stroke Association. The guidelines for what are considered healthy blood pressure numbers dropped recently, from under

140/90 to under 120/80, so even if your BP has always been fine, it's a good time to get it checked again.

**2. Consider cholesterol-controlling meds—even if your numbers aren't high.** "This is surprising, but even if your cholesterol is within a good limit, it is still a good idea to take a statin," says Patrick D. Lyden, M.D., chair of the neurology department at Cedars-Sinai and director of the Cedars-Sinai Stroke Center in Los Angeles. "Such drugs protect your arteries, even without lowering your cholesterol." National Stroke Association guidelines recommend aiming to keep your total cholesterol under 200, with your LDL "bad" cholesterol under 100.



**3. Walk briskly for 30 minutes a day.**

"Getting into the exercise habit is the best thing you can do for your heart and your blood vessels," says Labovitz. "You don't need to train for the Olympics."

**4. Women: Know your hormone-related risk factors.** Researchers are reevaluating the long-held belief that birth control pills can elevate your risk of stroke—that now appears to affect only women who have migraine with aura (visual disturbances like flashing colors or shapes). But hormone replacement therapy (HRT) for menopause that contains estrogen is still believed to up your risk, says Sarah Lee, M.D., neurologist at the Stanford Stroke Center in the San Francisco Bay Area. If your HRT is progestin-only, you're in the clear. (If you're not sure what type you had or are undergoing, ask your doctor.)

**If you think someone is having a stroke, should you call 911?**

**A. Yes.** You may be tempted to drive to the nearest hospital, but stroke is a medical emergency and time is of the essence to minimize brain damage and prevent long-term disability or death. Emergency operators know which hospitals near you are best-suited to treat strokes, and EMTs can start interventions immediately while in communication with staff at the hospital. Some medical centers even have mobile stroke units, or ambulances that are outfitted with equipment such as a portable CT unit, to expedite diagnosis and treatment.

—Zeshaun Khawaja, M.D.,  
Cleveland Clinic stroke specialist

**5. Keep your chronic conditions in check.** Diabetes, sleep apnea and atrial fibrillation all raise your risk of stroke, particularly if they are undiagnosed or uncontrolled. Shortness of breath and heart palpitations are warning signs of atrial fibrillation; snoring and excessive sleepiness can indicate sleep apnea. If you have any of these symptoms, it's time for a doc visit.