

Stroke Risk Reduction: A Healthy Nutrition Guide

Every forty-five seconds someone in this country has a stroke. More than 795,000 strokes occur annually, making stroke a leading cause of adult disability. The good news, however, is that attention to stroke risk factors, a low salt/low fat diet, regular exercise and regular check-ups with your physician may reduce your stroke risk.

Stroke Prevention Guidelines

If you are at risk for stroke, be sure to work with your doctor to manage your risk.

- **Know your blood pressure.** If it is elevated, work with your doctor to control it. High blood pressure is a leading risk factor for stroke, and should be checked at least once a year. 120/80 blood pressure reading is considered normal. 120-139/80-89 means you are at increased risk for high blood pressure. 140/90 or above is considered high blood pressure.

To lower blood pressure, many doctors recommend quitting smoking, losing weight and limiting salt intake. Also, increasing consumption of potassium (found in bananas, orange juice and tomatoes) may help lower blood pressure, regulate heart rhythm and lower stroke risk. If you need medication, be sure to take it exactly as prescribed by your doctor.

- **Find out if you have atrial fibrillation (AF),** a type of irregular heartbeat. If you do, work with your doctor to manage it. AF causes blood to collect in the chambers of the heart, which can lead to blood clots and cause a stroke.

Although some people with AF have no symptoms, check with your doctor if you experience dizziness, shortness of breath, or sudden pounding or fluttering in the chest. AF is often treated with medication and changes in diet and exercise.

- **If you smoke, stop.** Smoking doubles the risk for stroke. If you stop smoking today, your stroke risk will immediately begin to decrease.
- **If you drink alcohol, do so in moderation.** Although studies have indicated that drinking a daily, four ounce glass of wine or a 12 ounce can of beer or one drink made with spirits or liquor (1 ¼ ounce) may lower stroke risk, drinking more than two alcohol drinks each day can actually increase stroke risk. Remember that alcohol is a drug – it can interact with other drugs you are taking, and alcohol is harmful if taken in large doses. If you drink too much, cut back or stop. If you don't drink, don't start.

- **Know your cholesterol number.** If it is high, work with your doctor to control it. A total cholesterol level of more than 200 is considered high and makes you more susceptible to heart disease – another stroke risk factor. High cholesterol can also lead to hardening of the arteries, and contribute to high blood pressure, obesity, and diabetes. Cholesterol can often be controlled through diet and exercise, and medication, if necessary.
- **If you are diabetic, follow your doctor’s recommendations** to manage it. Diabetes can increase stroke risk by increasing the severity of hardened arteries and by damaging small blood vessels and nerves. Diabetes can often be controlled with medication and attention to nutrition and exercise.

Diabetes prevention includes maintaining a healthy weight, exercising and eating a low-fat diet filled with at least five servings of fruits and vegetables and low in refined carbohydrates and sugars to control blood sugar.

- **Find out if you have circulation problems.** If you do, work with your doctor to control them.
- **Include exercise in your daily routine.** Burning 1,000 calories each week – the equivalent of walking briskly for 30 minutes, five days a week – can lower your risk of stroke by 24 percent. Researchers suspect that exercise may protect against stroke by modifying risk factors such as high blood pressure, body weight and the body’s natural blood clotting ability.
- **Enjoy a lower sodium, lower fat diet.** A well balanced diet, including protein, carbohydrates, vegetables and fruit is a vital part of a stroke risk reduction plan. Health eating habits may help lower blood pressure rates, cholesterol levels and reduce complication from diabetes.

Eat Your Vegetables

A recent Harvard University study concluded that eating five daily servings of fruits and vegetables can lower your stroke risk by 30 percent. Citrus fruits and vegetables such as broccoli or cauliflower are particularly beneficial. Their higher concentrations of folic acid, fiber and potassium may be a key to reducing heart disease and stroke.

Most people eat only half of the recommended servings of fruits and vegetables. Increasing your intake can be easy. For example:

- Drink a glass of orange or vegetable juice
- Buy pre-sliced vegetables or fruit for easy snacking or cooking
- For flavor, use a variety of herbs and spices on vegetables. Add basil or dill to green beans or tomatoes
- Add grated vegetables to casseroles, spaghetti sauces or meat patties

Enjoy a Low-Fat Diet

Eating and cooking in a low-fat manner reduces your waistline and decreases stroke and heart attack risk. Taking a few minutes to think through your food choices, and how you cook them, can make a difference. For instance, grilling a piece of chicken instead of frying it in oil reduces your fat intake significantly and allows you to have a tasty, healthy meal.

Add the following foods to your regular diet:

- Fruits and vegetables
- Lean meats such as chicken, turkey and fish
- Lean cuts of beef (round or sirloin steak) or pork (pork chops, pork loin)
- Low-fat dairy products (skim milk, 2% fat cottage cheese)
- Egg substitutes or four egg yolks per week
- Fiber, including whole grain breads, cereal products or dried beans

Watch Your Homocysteine Levels

Homocysteine, an amino acid or building block of protein, is produced naturally in the body. When needed, it is changed into other amino acids for the body's use. Researchers recently found that too much homocysteine in the blood may increase a person's chance of developing heart disease, stroke or other blood flow disorders.

Homocysteine levels are determined by two key factors – genetics and lifestyle. Genetic factors affect how fast homocysteine is processed in your body. Lifestyle factors, such as diet, affect homocysteine levels in another manner. For example, people with a high homocysteine level may have a low level of vitamins B6, B12 and folic acid. Replacing these vitamins with supplements or fortified foods may help return levels to normal. Low thyroid hormone levels, kidney disease, psoriasis or some medications may also cause abnormally high homocysteine levels.

Folic Acid

Folic acid is another part of the homocysteine puzzle. Most Americans, especially women, do not get enough folic acid from their diets. Eating more fruits and vegetables including lentils, chickpeas, asparagus, ready-to-eat cereals, fortified bread, pasta and rice, may increase folic acid levels and decrease health risks.

Vitamins B12 and B6

As a person's body ages, the ability to absorb B12 is reduced. This may cause a variety of health problems including an increased risk for heart disease. Foods that contain vitamins B12 and B6 include fortified cereals, low-fat meat, fish, poultry, milk products, bananas, baked potatoes and watermelon. In some instances of vitamin B12 deficiency, vitamin injections may be necessary.

However, adjusting diet may not always be enough to lower homocysteine to a desirable level. Vitamin supplements may also be needed. Speak with your doctor before starting any vitamin regimen. Taking high doses of vitamins is not generally recommended. Re-checking homocysteine levels after taking vitamins is essential. If levels remain high, your doctor can modify treatment.