

Warning Signs of Stroke

Stroke, or brain attack, is the third leading cause of death in the United States. The devastating affects of stroke often can be prevented if you quickly react to the body's warning signs. In most cases, receiving medical treatment by calling 9-1-1 within the first 3 hours of symptoms may significantly reduce disability or damage to your body and brain that stroke can cause.

Unfortunately, only about 5 percent of stroke patients arrive at the hospital before it's too late to reverse that damage. Here are some guidelines to help you prevent a major stroke from occurring or to recognize the symptoms if you are having a stroke.

Are You at Risk?

Stroke can affect anyone. If you are 55 years or older, black or have a family history of stroke, you are at greater risk. However, other risk factors can be managed:

- **High blood pressure (hypertension)** — This is the leading cause of stroke. If the higher number on a blood pressure reading is regularly more than 135 or if the lower number is regularly more than 85, consult your healthcare provider/doctor.

- **Atrial fibrillation (AF) (irregular heartbeat)** — By checking your pulse, your healthcare provider can determine if you have an irregular heartbeat and offer appropriate treatment. AF causes more blood to collect in the chambers in your heart, which can lead to blood clots.

- **Smoking** — If you smoke, you are doubling your stroke risk. The good news is that quitting right away will considerably reduce this risk.

- **Drinking too much alcohol** — More than two drinks a day can increase your risk for stroke by about 50 percent.

- **High cholesterol** — Have your cholesterol checked with a blood test to see if the "bad cholesterol" (low-density lipoprotein, or LDL cholesterol) level is high. If it is more than 200, consult with your healthcare provider about reducing your cholesterol. In most cases, maintaining a healthy diet can control it.

- **Diabetes** — If you are a person with diabetes, follow your diet and your healthcare provider's instructions to help maintain your health and reduce your stroke risk.

- **Not exercising regularly** — While all exercise helps, a brisk walk for as little as 30 minutes a day may be enough to reduce your stroke risk.



- **Too much salt and fat in your diet** — Cutting down on salt and fat can help lower blood pressure and the risk for stroke.

- **Circulation problems** — Sickle cell anemia, severe anemia, atherosclerosis and other circulation diseases can interrupt the flow of blood to the brain, which could lead to a stroke. Your healthcare provider can test to see if you have a circulation problem and offer ways to treat it.

- **Overweight or obesity** — If you are heavy, you're putting an increased strain on your circulatory system, making you more at risk for high cholesterol, high blood pressure and diabetes — all factors that can cause a stroke.

- **Stroke history** — If you previously had a stroke, you're more at risk for another.

- **Sleep disorders** — Sleep apnea, a breathing disorder that occurs during sleep, causes blood pressure rates to increase — a risk for stroke or heart attack. An early diagnosis of this disorder can help reduce your risk of stroke.

Symptoms

Here are the five most common stroke symptoms, according to the National Stroke Association. If you experience any of these, immediately call 9-1-1. These include sudden:

- numbness or weakness of face, arm or leg — especially on one side of the body;
- confusion, trouble speaking or understanding people speaking to you;
- problems seeing in one or both eyes;
- trouble walking, dizziness, loss of balance or coordination; or
- severe headache with no known cause.

Other symptoms to pay attention to:

- Sudden nausea, fever and vomiting, which seem different from when you get the flu, where symptoms develop over several days.
- Brief loss of consciousness, such as fainting, confusion, convulsions or coma.

What to Do

If you think that you are having a stroke, don't waste any time. Call 9-1-1 immediately.

Sources: National Stroke Association: www.stroke.org

• American Stroke Association: www.strokeassociation.org

Compiled by Tom Kerr, editor of ADVANCE for LPNs in the Philadelphia Tri-State Area and the MD/VA/DC area.

The purpose of this patient education handout is to further explain or remind you about a medical condition. This handout is a general guide only. If you have specific questions, be sure to discuss them with your health care provider. This handout may be reproduced for distribution to patients.

