

Stroke: Brief Version

What is a stroke?

A stroke happens when the blood supply to part of the brain is suddenly reduced or stopped. That part of the brain dies and no longer works.

How does it occur?

Blood cannot get to your brain when a blood vessel is blocked or breaks inside the brain. This can happen in different ways. For example:

- A blood clot in an artery may block blood flow to the brain.
- An artery in the brain may break and bleed into the brain.

You are more likely to have a stroke if:

- You have high blood pressure.
- You have heart disease.
- You have diabetes.
- You have sleep apnea.
- You have sickle cell anemia.
- You use cocaine.
- You have high cholesterol.
- You smoke cigarettes.
- Someone in your family has had a stroke.
- You are overweight.
- Your arteries have fatty deposits on the inside.

What are the symptoms?

Every stroke is different. The symptoms you have depend on the part of the brain damaged by the stroke. Symptoms may come on suddenly. Here are some of the warning signs:

- You may feel weak or numb on one side of the body. You may feel tingling in your face, arm, or leg.
- You may feel dizzy or lose your balance. You may have trouble walking.
- You may not be able to speak. You may have a hard time understanding what others say.
- You may be confused or have a change in personality.
- You may have trouble seeing in one or both eyes or have double vision.
- You have a hard time moving your muscles. It may be hard to swallow or move your arms and legs.
- You may lose bowel or bladder control.
- You may have a severe headache.
- You may faint.

How do I know if I am having a stroke?

If you have any of the symptoms of a stroke, call 911 and go to an emergency room right away. Every minute counts.

Your doctor will be able to tell you if it is a stroke. These tests likely will be done:

- Lab tests of your blood.
- A brain scan to try to find out if there is a stroke.
- Ultrasound scan of blood vessels in your neck.
- Special X-rays of blood vessels in your brain.
- A test to see how your heart is working.

How is it treated?

The doctor may give you a medicine to break down blood clots. These medicines must be given within 2 to 4 hours after the stroke started. They can make symptoms go away very quickly and prevent permanent injury.

After a stroke, you need to be watched and cared for. You will likely stay in the hospital for a few days. You will need bed rest. You may need an IV and oxygen. You will need treatment for whatever caused the stroke.

You will start a rehabilitation program. The program may start while you are in the hospital or a nursing facility. It may last for weeks or months after you leave the hospital. The program is made up of:

- Physical therapy. It helps you get back your muscle strength. It teaches you ways to move safely even if some of your muscles are weak or paralyzed.
- Occupational therapy. It will help you relearn how to eat, dress, and take care of yourself.
- Speech therapy. It may help you if have problems relearning to swallow, speak, or understand words.

How long will it take to get well?

How long it takes to get better depends on how badly the brain was injured.

- Some things may get better in a few days or weeks.
- Other problems may take longer to improve.
- People can regain strength and their speech can get better up to 1 year after a stroke.

Once your rehab is done, your doctor can tell you better what you can expect.

How can I take care of myself?

Talk with your doctor about what caused your stroke. Follow his or her advice about what to eat, how to exercise, and how to handle stress.

How can I prevent having a stroke?

- If you have high blood pressure, be sure you take your medicine.
- If you smoke, quit.
- Keep your diet low in fat. That will lower the chance of getting fatty deposits in your blood vessels.
- Exercise every day. Ask your doctor for an exercise program.
- Keep a healthy weight.

Developed by RelayHealth

Published by RelayHealth.

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