

Women and Stroke



One in five women in the United States will have a stroke in her lifetime. Nearly 60% of stroke deaths are in women, and stroke kills twice as many women as breast cancer. Surprised? You're not alone. Stroke is the third leading cause of death for women, yet most women do not know their risk of having a stroke.

These facts are alarming, but there is some good news: Up to 80% of strokes can be prevented. This means it is important to know your risk of having a stroke and to take action to reduce that risk.

What Is a Stroke?

A stroke, sometimes called a brain attack, occurs when blood flow to an area of the brain is cut off. When brain cells are starved of oxygen, they die. Stroke is a medical emergency. It's important to get treatment as soon as possible. A delay in treatment increases the risk of permanent brain damage or death.

What Puts Women at Risk of Stroke?

- **High blood pressure** is a main risk factor for stroke, yet nearly one in three women with high blood pressure does not know she has it.
- Stroke risk increases with **age**, and women live longer than men. This is why 6 in 10 people who die from stroke are women. Also, the percentage of strokes in women aged 45 or younger is increasing. Younger women may have different symptoms of stroke, such as dizziness or headache, than women age 46 and older do.
- Women have some unique risk factors for stroke. Having high blood pressure during **pregnancy** raises a woman's risk for stroke.
- Certain types of **birth control** medicines may raise stroke risk in women with high blood pressure, especially if they smoke.
- Women are twice as likely as men to experience depression and anxiety, and women often report higher stress levels than men do. These **mental health issues** all raise a person's risk for stroke.

Not all women are equally affected by stroke. African-American women are nearly twice as likely to have a stroke as white women, mainly because of having high blood pressure, being overweight, and having diabetes.



**Blanche
Teal-Cruise**

A smoker for 40 years, Blanche knew her habit was unhealthy. But she had no idea how it would eventually affect her health.

When Blanche almost fell down one morning after getting out of bed, she blamed her dizziness on vertigo, a condition that makes you feel dizzy or lightheaded. But when she tried to turn on the light, her arm felt like dead weight. So she rested a short while until she felt better. Then she took a shower and drove to work. She had no idea she had suffered a mild stroke.

When she arrived at work, a coworker noticed that Blanche was not walking straight. When Blanche spoke, she felt as if she had to push the words out of her mouth.

Blanche was lucky: When she got to the hospital, she was diagnosed with a transient ischemic attack, often called a "mini-stroke." Unlike major strokes, mini-strokes don't cause permanent injury to the brain. But mini-strokes can lead to a major stroke.

Blanche's mini-stroke was a wake-up call. Two weeks after her mini-stroke, Blanche quit smoking for good. Like many African-American women, Blanche also had high blood pressure. She now takes medicine to control her blood pressure and walks her dog every day to stay active. She sees her doctor regularly and works to keep her weight down.

Blanche always talks to her friends and family about how to reduce their chances of having a stroke and how to recognize if someone is having a stroke. She has learned so much about how to prevent stroke, and she likes to spread the word to others about the importance of going to the doctor and quitting smoking.

How Can I Prevent Stroke?

Most strokes can be prevented by keeping medical conditions under control and making lifestyle changes. A good place to start is to know your **ABCS of heart health**:

- A Aspirin:** Aspirin may help reduce your risk for stroke. But you should check with your doctor before taking aspirin because it can make some types of stroke worse. Before taking aspirin, talk with your doctor about whether aspirin is right for you.
- B Blood Pressure:** Control your blood pressure.
- C Cholesterol:** Manage your cholesterol.
- S Smoking:** Quit smoking or don't start.

Make lifestyle changes:

- **Eat healthy and stay active.** Choose healthy foods most of the time, including foods with less salt, or sodium, to lower your blood pressure, and get regular exercise. Being overweight or obese raises your risk of stroke.
- **Talk to your doctor about your chances of having a stroke,** including your age and whether anyone in your family has had a stroke.
- **Get other health conditions under control,** such as diabetes or heart disease.

What Is CDC Doing About Stroke?

CDC and its partners are leading national initiatives and programs to reduce the death and disability caused by stroke and to help women live longer, healthier lives.

- CDC's [Division for Heart Disease and Stroke Prevention](#) (DHDSP) provides resources to all 50 states to address heart disease and stroke.
- DHDSP supports the [WISEWOMAN](#) program that provides low-income, under-insured or uninsured women with chronic disease risk factor screening, lifestyle programs, and referral services in an effort to prevent heart disease and strokes.
- The [Paul Coverdell National Acute Stroke Program](#) funds states to measure, track, and improve the quality of care for stroke patients. The program works to reduce death and disabilities from stroke.
- The [Million Hearts](#)[®] initiative, which is co-led by CDC and the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, works with other federal agencies and private sector partners to raise awareness about stroke prevention. Million Hearts[®] aims to prevent 1 million heart attacks and strokes by 2017.

If Stroke Happens, Act F.A.S.T.

Knowing your risk factors is only half the battle. Strokes come on suddenly and should be treated as medical emergencies. If you think you or someone else may be having a stroke, act F.A.S.T.:



F—Face:

Ask the person to smile. Does one side of the face droop?



A—Arms:

Ask the person to raise both arms. Does one arm drift downward?



S—Speech:

Ask the person to repeat a simple phrase. Is the speech slurred or strange?



T—Time:

If you see any of these signs, call 9-1-1 right away.

Calling an ambulance is critical because emergency medical technicians, or EMTs, can take you to a hospital that can treat stroke patients, and in some cases they can begin life-saving treatment on the way to the emergency room. Some treatments for stroke work only if given within the first 3 hours after symptoms start.

Learn more by visiting www.cdc.gov/stroke