

### Tip Sheet #3



## Risk Factors for Another Stroke

**What are risk factors for another stroke?** There are many things that can put the survivor at risk for another stroke. Some things can be managed with the help of a doctor. Some things require lifestyle changes. Some things can't be changed. As a caregiver, you can help.

**Risk factors that the survivor can manage with a doctor's help are:**

- **Transient Ischemic Attacks (TIA)** -These are known as “mini strokes.” Warning signs of stroke appear, then go away within minutes. TIAs are an emergency! **Call 911 if the survivor has any warning signs of stroke,** even if they go away within a few minutes. If the survivor has TIAs, the doctor may have them take medications to thin the blood.
- The warning signs of stroke are:
  - Sudden **numbness or weakness of the face, arm or leg**, especially on one side of the body
  - Sudden **confusion, trouble speaking or understanding**
  - Sudden trouble **seeing in one or both eyes**
  - Sudden trouble **walking, dizziness, loss of balance or coordination**
  - Sudden, **severe headache** with no known cause

**Another way to recognize a stroke is BE FAST.**

**B-** Balance – Loss of balance?

**E-** Eyes – Loss of vision in one or both eyes?

- F-** Facial drooping or numb? Ask the person to smile.
- A-** Arm weakness or numb? Ask the person to raise both arms.
- S-** Speech difficulty or slurred? Ask the person to say “The sky is blue.”
- T-** Time to call 911. Note the time when symptoms first noticed, and the time when they were “last seen well.”

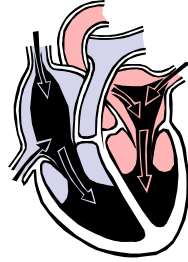
- **Carotid Artery Disease-** The large arteries found in the neck that lead to the brain can become clogged. There are tests to see if these arteries are clogged. Sometimes a surgery called a carotid endarterectomy is recommended. This is where plaque is removed from the carotid artery in the neck.
- **High Blood Pressure-** The pressure in the arteries is too high. A blood pressure above 140/90 is too high. There are medications that can help control high blood pressure.

The Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension (DASH) diet is recommended for people with high blood pressure. The DASH diet includes foods that are low in sodium (e.g., salt), saturated fats (e.g. red meat), and added sugar. The DASH diet is high in potassium, calcium, magnesium, and fiber that is found in vegetables, fruits, and whole grain breads and cereals.

The survivor should have their blood pressure taken regularly and keep a record of their blood pressure values to show to the doctor.  
***High Blood Pressure is the #1 overall risk factor for stroke, especially for hemorrhagic stroke.***

- **Diabetes Mellitus-** There is too much sugar in the bloodstream. It is usually reported by a test called blood glucose (also known as blood sugar). **Ask the doctor about the survivor’s blood glucose.**

Diabetes is common in stroke survivors. Medications and an individualized diet plan are needed to help control diabetes. Persons with diabetes must also keep a record of their daily blood glucose values and the medications that they are taking.



- **Heart Disease-** The heart is not working properly. Survivors who have had a heart attack or have been told they have heart failure are at greater risk for another stroke. A low sodium (salt), low cholesterol diet and medications are usually needed.
- **Atrial Fibrillation and other heart problems-** Atrial fibrillation is when the heart has an irregular beat. Blood clots can form that can travel to the brain to cause a stroke. Problems with the valves in the heart from birth or from Rheumatic fever can also cause clots to form. Medications to thin the blood are often used to prevent clots. ***Atrial Fibrillation is a common risk factor for ischemic stroke.***
- **High Cholesterol –** There are 2 types of cholesterol. Good HDL cholesterol protects the arteries. Bad LDL cholesterol can cause fatty stuff to clog arteries. Too much of the bad LDL cholesterol can put the survivor at risk for another stroke because it can clog arteries leading to the brain. A total blood cholesterol should be below 200. A low cholesterol diet (e.g., low fat foods) that includes a variety of foods from each food group is needed. Sometimes medications are needed as well. ***High cholesterol is a very important risk factor for ischemic stroke.***
- **Peripheral artery disease –** This is where the blood vessels carrying blood to the arms and legs are narrowed. It usually results from plaque build-up in the arteries because of poor diet, high cholesterol, or lack of exercise. Blood clots can form in the arms or legs and travel to the brain causing a stroke.
- **Sickle cell disease –** This is a genetic disease common to African American and Hispanic children. The red blood cells are “sickled” or have an unusual shape. Because of this shape, the red blood cells are unable to carry as much oxygen and may stick to the blood

vessels. If sickled red blood cells block a blood vessel leading to the brain, it can cause a stroke.

- **Brain aneurysm** – This is a weak or bulging area on a blood vessel in the brain. Over time, pressure from the blood on this spot may cause it to break, spilling blood into the brain, resulting in a hemorrhagic stroke. Surgery is sometimes needed to repair an aneurysm. Controlling high blood pressure is especially important.
- **Tooth loss and gum disease** – A recent study has linked tooth loss and gum disease with stroke. Bacteria from tooth decay and gingivitis can enter the bloodstream and cause the blood to clot. This can put a person at risk for stroke. See your dentist regularly.

### **Risk factors that the survivor can manage with lifestyle changes:**

- **Physical inactivity**- Sitting in one place all day can make the survivor weak. It can also cause clots to form in the body that can break off and travel to the brain. This can lead to another stroke.
- **Unhealthy diet and obesity** – A diet that is high in saturated, trans fat, and cholesterol can clog arteries leading to the brain. This can cause another stroke. Obesity or being overweight can also increase the chances of another stroke.
- **Smoking, too much alcohol intake, or illegal drug use** – These are factors that the survivor can change. There are many organizations that can help. Talk to the survivor's doctor about how to quit smoking, reduce alcohol intake, or stop using illegal drugs.



- **Touchy topics** – Lifestyle changes can be challenging for both the survivor and the caregiver. Talking about lifestyle changes can sometimes create friction in a relationship. It is usually easier when both the survivor and the caregiver can work together on common goals. **See Skill-Building Tip Sheet SB7 Goal Setting: Taking Care of Your Health.** This tip sheet covers how to set a goal and create an action plan for a healthier lifestyle. Both the survivor and the caregiver can benefit from this process.

### **Risk factors that the survivor cannot change:**

- **Increasing age-** As the survivor gets older, their risk for another stroke increases.
- **Male gender-** Males are most at risk, but stroke is also common in females.
- **Heredity and race** – Persons who are Hispanic or African American are especially at risk because of greater incidence of high blood pressure. Stroke also runs in families.
- **Prior stroke-** Having a prior stroke increases the survivor's risk for another stroke.



**What can I do as a caregiver to help the survivor with risk factors for another stroke?**

**Put an X beside each of the risk factors that the survivor has below.**

- |                                                                     |                                                             |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> TIAs                                       | <input type="checkbox"/> Physical inactivity                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Carotid Artery Disease                     | <input type="checkbox"/> Unhealthy diet and obesity         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> High Blood Pressure                        | <input type="checkbox"/> Smoking, alcohol, or illegal drugs |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Diabetes Mellitus                          | <input type="checkbox"/> Increasing age                     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Heart Disease                              | <input type="checkbox"/> Male gender                        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Atrial Fibrillation & other heart problems | <input type="checkbox"/> Heredity and race                  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> High Cholesterol                           | <input type="checkbox"/> Prior stroke                       |

Try to help them manage the risk factors they can change with the help of their doctor. This may include helping them with medications, special diets, or getting them to doctor appointments. **Skill-Building Tip Sheet SB7 Goal Setting: Taking Care of your Health** can be useful in setting goals. Careful communication and working together on common goals can help.

**Call 911 if the stroke survivor has a TIA or warning signs of another stroke (See Tip Sheet #1 for Warning Signs of Another Stroke).**

## **Where can I find more information about the risk factors for another stroke?**

Call the American Stroke Association's Toll-Free Warmline or visit their website. **American Stroke Association's Toll-Free Warmline**

**1-888-4-STROKE or 1-888-478-7653**

**American Stroke Association's Website**

[www.StrokeAssociation.org](http://www.StrokeAssociation.org)

**For more information about Ischemic or Hemorrhagic Strokes,  
contact the**

**American Stroke Association**

**1-800-STROKES**

**1-800-787-6537**

[www.stroke.org](http://www.stroke.org)

**For more information about heart disease, high blood pressure, or diabetes contact:**

American Heart Association

[www.americanheart.org](http://www.americanheart.org)

1-800-242-8721

American Diabetes Association

<http://www.diabetes.org/>

1-800-DIABETES or 1-800-342-2383

## **Recommended Books**

Senelick, R.C. (2016). Living with Stroke: A Guide for Patients and Their Families (Fifth Edition). Birmingham: Healthsouth Press. ISBN 978-1891525186.

Jorgensen, L. (2021). The Caregiver's Guide to Stroke Recovery: Practical Advice for Caring for You and Your Loved One. Emeryville, California: Rockridge Press. ISBN 978-1-64876-577-3.