

**Some risk factors for a transient ischemic attack and stroke can't be changed. Others you can control.**

**Risk factors you can't change**

You can't change the following risk factors for a transient ischemic attack and stroke. But knowing you're at risk can motivate you to change your lifestyle to reduce other risks.

- **Family history.** Your risk may be greater if one of your family members has had a TIA or a stroke.
- **Age.** Your risk increases as you get older, especially after age 55.
- **Sex.** Men have a slightly higher risk of a TIA and a stroke.
- **Prior transient ischemic attack.** If you've had one or more TIAs, you're much more likely to have a stroke.
- **Sickle cell disease.** Stroke is a frequent complication of sickle cell disease. In this inherited disorder, sickle-shaped blood cells carry less oxygen and also tend to get stuck in artery walls, hampering blood flow to the brain. However, proper treatment can lower your risk of a stroke.

**Risk factors you can control**

You can control or treat a number of factors — including certain health conditions and lifestyle choices — that increase your risk of a stroke.

**Health conditions**

- **High blood pressure.** The risk of a stroke begins to increase at blood pressure readings higher than 140/90 millimeters of mercury (mm Hg). Your doctor will help you decide on a target blood pressure based on your age, whether you have diabetes and other factors.
- **High cholesterol.** Eating less cholesterol and fat, especially saturated fat and trans-fat, may reduce the plaques in your arteries. If you can't control your cholesterol through dietary changes alone, your doctor may prescribe a statin or another type of cholesterol-lowering medication.
- **Cardiovascular disease.** This includes heart failure, a heart defect, a heart infection or an abnormal heart rhythm.
- **Carotid artery disease.** The blood vessels in your neck that lead to your brain become clogged.
- **Peripheral artery disease (PAD).** The blood vessels that carry blood to your arms and legs become clogged.
- **Diabetes.** Diabetes increases the severity of atherosclerosis — narrowing of the arteries due to accumulation of fatty deposits — and the speed with which it develops.
- **High levels of homocysteine.** Elevated levels of this amino acid in your blood can cause your arteries to thicken and scar, which makes them more susceptible to clots.

- **Excess weight.** Obesity, especially carrying extra weight in the abdominal area, increases stroke risk in both men and women.

#### Lifestyle choices

- **Cigarette smoking.** Quit smoking to reduce your risk of a TIA and a stroke. Smoking increases your risk of blood clots, raises your blood pressure and contributes to the development of cholesterol-containing fatty deposits in your arteries (atherosclerosis).
- **Physical inactivity.** Engaging in 30 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise most days helps reduce risk.
- **Poor nutrition.** Reducing your intake of fat and salt decreases your risk of a TIA and a stroke.
- **Heavy drinking.** If you drink alcohol, limit yourself to no more than two drinks daily if you're a man and one drink daily if you're a woman.
- **Use of illicit drugs.** Avoid cocaine and other illicit drugs.

#### Prevention

Knowing your risk factors and living healthfully are the best things you can do to prevent a TIA. Included in a healthy lifestyle are regular medical checkups. Also:

- **Don't smoke.** Stopping smoking reduces your risk of a TIA or a stroke.
- **Limit cholesterol and fat.** Cutting back on cholesterol and fat, especially saturated fat and trans-fat, in your diet may reduce buildup of plaques in your arteries.
- **Eat plenty of fruits and vegetables.** These foods contain nutrients such as potassium, folate and antioxidants, which may protect against a TIA or a stroke.
- **Limit sodium.** If you have high blood pressure, avoiding salty foods and not adding salt to food may reduce your blood pressure. Avoiding salt may not prevent hypertension, but excess sodium may increase blood pressure in people who are sensitive to sodium.
- **Exercise regularly.** If you have high blood pressure, regular exercise is one of the few ways you can lower your blood pressure without drugs.
- **Limit alcohol intake.** Drink alcohol in moderation, if at all. The recommended limit is no more than one drink daily for women and two a day for men.
- **Maintain a healthy weight.** Being overweight contributes to other risk factors, such as high blood pressure, cardiovascular disease and diabetes. Losing weight with diet and exercise may lower your blood pressure and improve your cholesterol levels.
- **Don't use illicit drugs.** Drugs such as cocaine are associated with an increased risk of a TIA or a stroke.
- **Control diabetes.** You can manage diabetes and high blood pressure with diet, exercise, weight control and, when necessary, medication.

By Mayo Clinic Staff

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