

Diabetes Inside Out – Our guide to understanding CVD, diabetes and insulin resistance

If you have diabetes, you're at higher risk of stroke. In fact, between two-thirds and three-fourths of people with diabetes die of some form of heart or blood vessel disease. That means reducing your stroke risk is critical.

"Cardiovascular risk factors associated with diabetes increase the risk of stroke by two to four times," said Richard Nesto, M.D., a spokesperson for the American Heart Association. "Simple lifestyle changes, and controlling variables such as nutrition, blood pressure and physical activity, can significantly reduce this risk."

Here are some important tips on how to reduce your risk and live a more positive, healthy life with diabetes.

What Puts You at Risk

Several factors put people with diabetes at a higher risk for stroke:

- **Hypertension.** High blood pressure is the most important risk factor for stroke.
- **Certain blood disorders.** A high red blood cell count and sickle cell anemia make blood clots more likely, increasing stroke risk.
- **Heart disease.** People who have heart disease are at greater risk of stroke.
- **Gender.** The latest data show that, in most age groups, more men than women have a stroke in a given year. But overall, especially at older ages, more women than men die of stroke.
- **"Mini-strokes" (transient ischemic attacks, or TIA).** These strokes occur when a blood clot briefly blocks an artery that supplies blood to the brain. Although they cause no lasting damage, mini-strokes are strong predictors of a major stroke.
- **Excessive alcohol intake.** Drinking too much alcohol (an average of more than one drink a day for women and more than two drinks a day for men) and binge drinking increase risk. One drink is defined as 1-1/2 fluid ounces (fl oz) of 80-proof spirits (such as bourbon, Scotch, vodka, gin, etc.), 1 fl oz of 100-proof spirits, 4 fl oz of wine, or 12 fl oz of beer. Excess alcohol can raise blood pressure; contribute to obesity, high triglycerides, cancer and other diseases; cause heart failure; and lead to stroke.

Other factors that increase your chances of stroke include drug abuse, socioeconomic factors and certain seasonal cues (e.g., hot or cold weather can bring on stroke symptoms).

Reducing Your Risk

Control your diabetes.

It's important to control your blood sugar to reduce your risk of complications from diabetes, such as nerve problems. Talk to your healthcare provider about your ideal blood sugar level.

Lose weight and stay physically active.

Excess weight increases your risk of heart disease and thus increases your risk of stroke. Obesity strains your heart and raises blood pressure. If you're overweight, losing even 10 to 20 pounds can significantly lower your risk. Obesity is also common in people with type 2 diabetes. In fact, over 80 percent of people with diabetes are overweight, and many of them aren't physically active. It's also important to eat fewer fatty foods, reduce the calories you eat, and increase your physical activity to stay at a healthy weight. Maintaining some routine of physical activity will help lower your blood pressure, control cholesterol and high blood pressure, further reducing your

odds of having a stroke.

Control your blood pressure.

Blood pressure lower than 120/80 is considered normal. It's important to control high blood pressure. A blood pressure reading for someone with diabetes should be lower than 130/80 mm Hg (millimeters of mercury). If your blood pressure is 130/80 or higher, consult your doctor and take the steps necessary to lower it. Lowering your sodium intake will help lower your blood pressure if you're salt-sensitive.

Stop smoking.

Smoking cigarettes and using other tobacco products significantly increases your chance of having a stroke. By smoking you're also putting yourself at higher risk of cancer, lung diseases and heart attack. If you smoke, get help to quit, and avoid other people's smoke.

Treat "mini strokes" like a big deal.

Nicknamed "mini-strokes," transient ischemic attacks (TIAs) are strong predictors of a future major stroke. If you've had one or more TIA, you're 10 times more likely to have a stroke than someone of the same age and sex who hasn't. **Don't ignore "mini strokes." Call 9-1-1 immediately and get medical attention.**

Know the stroke warning signs.

A stroke could be in progress if you experience or witness:

- 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

The short duration of these symptoms and lack of permanent brain injury is the main distinction between TIA and stroke. If you have symptoms like these, **don't hesitate. Call 9-1-1 immediately! Time lost is brain lost.**

Being aware of your risk factors and taking the necessary steps to reduce their effects can have a significant impact on your health. Take time during American Stroke Month to make even one small change. It could save your life.

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