



Women and Stroke: Not a Happy Couple

Stroke, or Brain Attack, is a condition that affects both men and women. However, studies show that women are particularly vulnerable; although women make up only 43 percent of the strokes that occur each year, the mortality rate is higher for women who have a stroke. The good news is that there are many ways for women to reduce their risk.

Strokes occur when blood vessels become blocked by a blood clot (80% of strokes) or when they break and bleed into the brain tissue (20% of strokes), which interrupts the blood supply to a section of the brain, and the brain cells die. Because different parts of the brain perform different functions, stroke affects each individual differently. While some suffer minor damage such as weakness in the arm or the leg, others may become paralyzed or lose the ability to talk or understand speech.

The onset of stroke symptoms, such as weakness or numbness of one arm or one leg, should prompt an immediate call to your physician. Sometimes, if you are treated within a few hours, the blockage of an artery in the brain can be reversed by the use of special “clot-busters”, but only if you are seen and diagnosed quickly.

High blood pressure, or hypertension, is the most common cause of stroke. Nearly 29 million women suffer from high blood pressure, including 55 percent of all women over 55. African-American women have a higher risk of severely high blood pressure than any other ethnic group. Everyone should have their blood pressure checked periodically because you may not have any symptoms at all until you have a stroke, even though your blood pressure may have been elevated for years. This is why hypertension is called the “Silent Killer”.

Salt can contribute to high blood pressure, therefore, try to avoid it when possible. Other ways to decrease blood pressure include weight loss and exercise. In fact, recent studies show that women who walk at least one-half hour a day for five days each week decrease their risk of heart attack or stroke by nearly a third. Controlling one’s alcohol consumption and not smoking can also reduce the risk of hypertension, thereby significantly reducing the chance of a stroke.

Diabetes is considered to be another risk factor especially in women. Higher levels of blood sugar in diabetics may increase the process of hardening of the arteries to the brain, and the chance of blood clots. Adequate control of blood sugar levels will help prevent strokes, but *never getting* Diabetes by controlling your weight and exercising daily is even more important.

High Cholesterol also increases the risk of stroke, and treatment of elevated cholesterol with medicine called “statins” can be done if proper diet does not work.

Those who experience migraines are also thought to be at perhaps a three to six times greater risk of stroke, and because migraine sufferers are often women, the onset of new severe headaches should be

reported to their physician. Fluctuating levels of the female hormone Estrogen may also contribute to the risk of stroke. Estrogen may exert its effects by increasing blood clotting (when levels are high like during pregnancy) or inhibiting the ability of blood vessels to repair themselves (when levels are low as during menopause).

HIGHEST RISK	MODERATE RISK
High Blood Pressure	Migraine headaches
Smoking	Pregnancy
High Cholesterol	Menopause
Diabetes Mellitus	Birth Control and Hormone Replacement therapy (particularly if a smoker or over age 35)

Table 1: Risk Factors for Stroke

Women who have more than one of these risk factors should consult a physician to help determine other ways to lower the chance of a stroke. Recognizing the risk factors and adapting one's lifestyle accordingly will significantly reduce the likelihood of stroke and other health problems. Stroke causes a huge amount of disability and suffering each year in the USA. Prevention is the key.

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