

Stroke and Transient Ischemic Attack

A GUIDE FOR PATIENTS

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What is a TIA and how is it different from a stroke?

Often referred to as a 'mini stroke', a TIA – or transient ischemic attack – is caused by a short term lack of blood supply to the brain. It is temporary and usually lasts from 30 seconds to 10 minutes, although it can last longer. It is a serious warning of the risk of a stroke. People who have had a TIA are five times more likely than the general population to have a stroke within the next two years.

A stroke is a sudden loss of brain function caused by the interruption of blood flow to the brain or the rupture of blood vessels in the brain. The majority of strokes – 80% – are caused by a blood clot blocking blood supply to the brain (ischemic stroke). Fewer – 20% – occur when an artery bursts in or near the brain (hemorrhagic stroke).

A stroke can result in paralysis or weakness to one side of the body, vision problems, difficulty speaking, fatigue, incontinence, depression, memory problems and personality changes.

Both a stroke and TIA are considered medical emergencies. The good news is you can reduce your own chances of having a TIA or a stroke by being attentive to your health and lifestyle choices. The information in these pages can guide you in reducing your risks and avoiding a stroke.

How do I know if I'm having a TIA or stroke?

The signs and symptoms of TIA or stroke are the same and include:

- Weakness – a sudden loss of strength or numbness in the face, arm or leg
- Speech difficulty or sudden confusion
- Vision problems – sudden loss of vision, particularly in one eye, or double vision
- Headache – sudden, severe and unusual headache
- Dizziness – sudden loss of balance

What do I do if I think I'm having a stroke or TIA?

Call 911 immediately. Do not drive yourself to the hospital. The sooner you get treatment, the more effective it will be. Even if your symptoms disappear on the way to the hospital, it is important that you seek medical help as soon as possible.

Can I prevent TIA or stroke?

You play the most important role in limiting your chances of having a stroke. While you can't change some risk factors you can take steps to reduce your risks through healthy choices.

The factors you can't change are:

Age: Although strokes can occur at any age, most occur in people over age 65

Gender: While women are at lower risk than men until menopause, more women than men die of stroke. There are particular risks for women around the time of pregnancy and with the combination of smoking and oral contraceptives.

Ethnic background: Canadians of First Nations, African or South Asian descent tend to have higher rates of elevated blood pressure and diabetes and are therefore at higher risk for stroke.

Family history: If someone in your family has had a TIA or stroke before age 65, you are at increased risk.

Take charge of your risk factors and reduce your TIA or stroke risk!

By taking charge and addressing the risk factors that you can influence, you can go a long way to avoiding TIA or stroke. Here's what you can do:

Reduce high blood pressure

High blood pressure is the greatest risk factor for stroke yet has no symptoms. The only way to know if yours is high is to have your blood pressure taken by a healthcare professional at least once every two years. Blood pressure that is consistently over 140/90 is considered high and it is important to reduce it to limit the risk of stroke. Proper diet, exercise and stress reduction can go a long way to reducing high blood pressure. If you have diabetes, follow your doctor's instructions to keep it under control. Not smoking and limiting alcohol consumption are key to keeping blood pressure within healthy limits. If your doctor prescribes medication to control blood pressure, you need to adhere to the instructions.

Stop Smoking

Quitting smoking can rapidly minimize your risk for stroke. By staying clear of second-hand or environmental tobacco smoke, non-smokers can also reduce their risk. Smoking is the most preventable cause of disease and death in Canada and causes almost as many deaths from stroke or heart attack as it does cancer. By quitting smoking you take a giant step in reducing your risk of TIA or stroke. It can be a difficult habit to kick and your doctor can recommend programs and medications that can help. The Heart and Stroke Foundation www.heartandstroke.bc.ca and ActNow BC www.actnowbc.ca have information that will help you on the path to becoming a non-smoker.

Eat a well balanced diet

Eat foods that are low in saturated fat, trans-fat and cholesterol (< 300 mg/day) and high in fibre. Recent studies also show a major benefit from consuming vegetables, fruits, fish (> 2 servings per week) and low-fat dairy products, as well as limiting salt intake. The DASH diet (Website: www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/heart/hbp/dash/new_dash.pdf) and Mediterranean diet have been shown to lower blood pressure and reduce cardiovascular risk. Eating well doesn't have to mean giving up the foods you love. It simply means choosing wisely from a variety of foods and choosing lower fat and less salty foods more often. For more information, call Dial-a-Dietician toll free at 1 800 667-3438 or visit www.dialadietitian.org.

Reduce salt intake

Reducing salt intake can prevent hypertension and lower elevated blood pressure. In addition to a well balanced diet, a reduced dietary sodium intake of 1500 milligrams per day (approximately 1 tsp of table salt) is recommended for people with hypertension. Call Dial-a-Dietician at 1-800-667-3438 or visit www.dialadietitian.org to learn about how to manage your diet and reduce your salt intake to control hypertension. Information on reducing salt intake can also be found on the Heart and Stroke Foundation's Website at www.heartandstroke.bc.ca.

Get Active

Just 30 minutes of physical activity most days of the week will put you on a path to reducing your risk of stroke and TIA. Walking instead of driving, taking the stairs instead of the elevator, and participating in activities you enjoy will quickly add up to 30 minutes a day. The more physically active you become, the better you will feel. Work towards incorporating 30-60 minutes of moderate activity (walking 3 km in 30 minutes once per day or 1.5 km twice per day, running, cycling or swimming) into 4-7 days per week. Remember to consult your doctor before you start a fitness program.

Reduce stress

Evidence suggests that stress may contribute to TIA and stroke. Continual stress places extra demands on the heart and can lead to unhealthy lifestyle choices – smoking, lack of physical activity, alcohol consumption, poor diet – that are known to contribute to TIA and stroke risk. By identifying and recognizing the stressors in your life you can take steps to avoid them. Regular exercise, relaxation and time management can be excellent stress busters. Consider taking a yoga class or learning the ancient art of tai chi to reduce stress and increase your general well being. The Heart and Stroke Foundation has online information on managing stress at www.heartandstroke.bc.ca and toll-free at 1888 HSF-INFO (1 888 473-4636).



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