A closer look at stroke: NetWellness

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With close to 800,000 strokes each year in the United States, stroke is a major health issue for many Americans. Stroke is the fourth-leading cause of death in the United States and a leading cause of serious, long-term disability.

While risk factors for stroke, such as being overweight, high blood pressure, increased cholesterol, and smoking mirror those of heart disease, many people are unaware of these risks and how to reduce them. With advanced emergency treatments now available to stop a stroke in its tracks, knowing the simple signs of stroke could save your brain and your life.

The seriousness and frequency of strokes often go unnoticed; however, strokes occur frequently and affect individuals in all age groups. In fact, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, someone in the United States has a stroke every 40 seconds, and almost 25 percent of strokes occur in people 65 years of age and under.
Recognizing what puts you and your loved ones at risk for a stroke is a powerful step toward not becoming a stroke victim. What is bad for the heart is bad for the brain, so working toward an overall, healthy lifestyle will not only reduce your risk for stroke but also heart attack, memory loss and many other diseases.

Understanding stroke

A stroke, often referred to as a "brain attack," is a serious medical condition that occurs when the blood supply to the brain is either interrupted due to blockage of a blood vessel and part of the brain dies, or a blood vessel ruptures causing bleeding into or around the brain. Patients experiencing a brain attack can be affected in a number of ways, including paralysis, loss of speech, loss of vision, loss of memory, and even death. About 80 percent of all strokes are caused by blockage of blood flow to the brain by a combination of plaque (fatty deposits and calcium) and blood clots.

Without the blood flow supplied by those blocked vessels, the brain has no oxygen and will die. Another kind of stroke, called a bleeding stroke, happens in about 20 percent of strokes when a weakened blood vessel breaks, causing bleeding and swelling. The most common causes of a bleeding stroke are cerebral aneurysm, when a weakened blood vessel balloons out and then breaks, or poorly treated high blood pressure.

Risk factors: Things you can and can’t control

Risk factors are conditions or lifestyle factors that increase risk of vascular disease. For most conditions, including stroke, there are a few risk factors over which you have little or no control and others that you can treat or even eliminate altogether.

Risk factors that can't be changed include gender (men are more likely to have a stroke than women), aging and having a family history of stroke (brother, sister, grandparent or parent). The best way to decrease your risk is to learn what your own risk factors are and then change or treat conditions that you can.

High blood pressure

High blood pressure (hypertension) is defined as blood pressure readings greater than 140/90. Often, high blood pressure can be remedied by losing weight and maintaining a healthy diet, low in saturated fat and sodium. In some cases, medication will have to be prescribed by a physician in order for the patient's blood pressure to reach a more desirable 120/80.
High cholesterol

Blood tests are a great tool for physicians to determine your risk for certain diseases. One example lies in cholesterol, which can be measured through a routine fasting blood test. Having a high HDL or "good cholesterol," is known to protect against the occurrence of a stroke, while having a high LDL or "bad cholesterol" will increase the risk of having a stroke.

Overweight

Being overweight or obese can serve as a gateway to many other diseases, including high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes and stroke. Working with a physician or a registered dietitian to start a personalized weight loss program can aid in the achievement of a healthier lifestyle and reduce the person's risk of having a stroke.

Cigarette smoking

In addition to its disastrous effects on the lungs, cigarette smoking can have negative effects on the cardiovascular system. Cigarette smoking can lead to a buildup of fatty deposits in the carotid artery, and nicotine, the primary drug found in cigarettes, raises blood pressure. Additionally, cigarette smoking increases the risk of blood clotting, and the carbon monoxide found in smoke reduces the amount of oxygen delivered to the brain.

Other risk factors

Some of these risks -- age, family history and gender -- cannot be changed. Risk from other conditions -- artery disease and diabetes -- can be significantly decreased with treatment.

Additional risk factors for stroke include: diabetes; sleep apnea; certain drugs and medications (for example, cocaine and alcohol); heart disease, including heart failure, heart valve disease, and endocarditis; carotid or other artery disease (buildup of plaque in arteries anywhere in the body increases the risk of stroke); atrial fibrillation (a particular kind of irregular heart rhythm that is detected by an EKG); sickle cell disease; age (stroke risk doubles with every decade increase in age); race (African-Americans and Hispanic-Americans are at greater risk of stroke); family history (risk increases if your parent, grandparent, brother or sister has had a stroke); pregnancy (women are at risk during pregnancy and in the weeks following delivery); having a serious head injury; prior stroke or "mini-strokes" (TIAs).

Being aware of these risk factors will help you know if you or a loved one is at risk for stroke. Taking care of your body and speaking to a physician about your risk factors will decrease the chances of having a stroke along with many other diseases.

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