

# Strike Back Against Stroke

Find out the steps you can take to prevent a deadly or disabling “brain attack”

> When it comes to stroke, the statistics are sobering. Stroke is the No. 2 cause of death worldwide, and a leading cause of disability in the United States. Each year, Americans pay about \$73.7 billion in stroke-related medical costs and disability, according to the American Stroke Association (ASA).

Often referred to as a “brain attack,” a stroke occurs when a blood vessel carrying oxygen and nutrients to the brain is either blocked by a clot (ischemic stroke) or it bursts (hemorrhagic stroke). If you suspect that someone is experiencing stroke symptoms, it’s critical to call 911 immediately, says Dr. Jason Freeman, a vascular neurologist at Sibley Memorial Hospital in Washington, D.C.

“Time is of the essence. The quicker you see a doctor, the quicker you can receive medications that could save your life and decrease the severity of potential side effects,” says Freeman.

Symptoms vary depending on the individual and where in the brain the stroke occurs, but there are some common warning signs to look for.

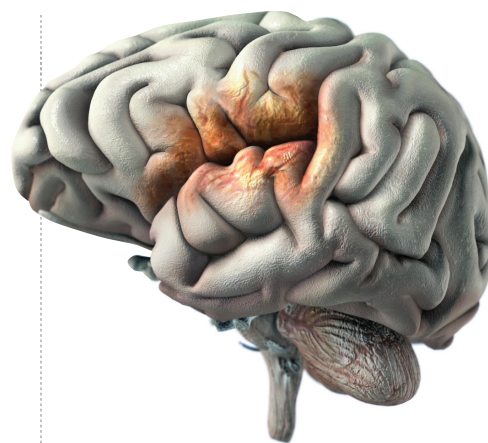
The ASA recommends using the “FAST” acronym as an easy way to remember these signs:

**F = FACE DROOPING:** Does one side of the face droop or is it numb? Ask the person to smile. Is the person’s smile uneven?

**A = ARM WEAKNESS:** Is one arm weak or numb? Ask the person to raise both arms. Does one arm drift downward?

**S = SPEECH DIFFICULTY:** Is speech slurred? Is the person unable to speak or hard to understand? Ask the person to repeat a simple sentence, like “The sky is blue.” Is the sentence repeated correctly?

**T = TIME TO CALL 911:** If someone shows any of these symptoms, even if the symptoms go away, call 911 and get the person to the hospital immediately. Check the time so you’ll know when the first symptoms appeared.



Some risk factors for stroke are unchangeable, notes Freeman. Your risk is higher, for instance, if a parent, grandparent or sibling has suffered a stroke. African Americans have a much higher risk of death from stroke than Caucasians do, and stroke is more common in men than women. Age also plays an important role: The chance of having a stroke approximately doubles for each decade of life after age 55, according to the ASA.

While there’s nothing you can do about your age or family history, there are factors that you *can* treat or control, many relating to lifestyle. Among them:

**Treat high blood pressure (hypertension).** High blood pressure forces the heart to pump blood more vigorously throughout the body. The increased pressure can weaken vessels, thus leading to a higher risk of stroke. Regular exercise, a healthy (low sodium) diet, and prescribed medication can be effective in controlling high blood pressure.

**Diagnose and treat atrial fibrillation (AF):** Approximately 15 percent of all stroke victims suffer from AF, a heart rhythm disorder in which the heart’s upper





chambers quiver rather than beat effectively. Symptoms include heart palpitations and a general feeling of dizziness. The good news? An estimated 75 percent of AF-related strokes can be prevented if AF is properly diagnosed and treated.

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**Put down the cigarettes:** Smoking doubles your risk of stroke.

**Trade those French fries for a salad:** Diets that are high in cholesterol (think: bacon cheeseburgers) can lead to fatty buildup in the arteries known as

atherosclerosis. And high-sodium fare is known to increase hypertension. “That’s why a healthy diet, rich in nutrients and low in cholesterol and sodium, is so important,” says Freeman. Replace that morning bagel and cream cheese with oatmeal and fruit, for

instance, and avoid fatty steaks in favor of chicken or lean cuts of beef.

**Get moving!** Exercising regularly and raising your heart rate strengthens the heart, notes Freeman, thereby lowering your risk of stroke. Aim for 30

minutes of brisk exercise each day (in consultation with your physician).

Adopting these and other common-sense practices, together with checkups with your doctor, can help you avoid becoming one of the estimated 137,000 people who die of stroke each year in the United States. ➤

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