

Health Spotlight: Stroke

- **One in four** people globally will have a stroke in their lifetime.¹
- Every **19 minutes**, someone in Australia has a stroke.¹
- Stroke is **one of Australia's biggest killers**, killing more women than breast cancer and more men than prostate cancer.¹
- **More than 80%** of strokes can be prevented.¹

What is a stroke?

Brain cells need enough oxygen and nutrients to survive. Oxygen and nutrients are transported to the brain through the blood supply. When the blood supply to the brain is interrupted, a stroke occurs. This may happen when an artery is blocked or bursts.²

The most common type of stroke is an ischaemic stroke which is caused by the blood supply being clogged. A haemorrhagic stroke is less likely to occur and is when a blood vessel bursts and then enters the brain.

High blood pressure and cerebral aneurysms (i.e. a weak spot on a blood vessel wall) are two contributing factors.

Warning signs

A major warning sign is known as a transient ischaemic attack (**TIA**) or 'mini stroke'. While symptoms may disappear after a short time, a TIA requires urgent medical attention and should not be ignored. TIAs are linked to an increased likelihood of a major stroke.³

Symptoms of a stroke or TIA include:

- Numbness, clumsiness, weakness or paralysis in the face, arm or leg. It's usually on one side, but can be on both;
- Severe and sudden headaches;
- Dizziness, in particular head spins;
- Loss of balance or unexplained falls;
- Loss of vision in one or both eyes;
- Difficulty swallowing; and
- Nausea or vomiting.

The **F.A.S.T.** test is one way to quickly identify if someone is having a stroke. This stands for:

Face - has their face or mouth drooped?

Arms - can they lift both arms?

Speech - is their speech slurred?

Do they understand you?

Time - is critical, call **000** immediately.

Risk factors

The risk factors of having a stroke fall into three main categories. The more risk factors you have, the greater the chance of having a stroke.

The first are fixed factors that cannot be controlled like age (i.e. risk increases with age), gender and family history. Second, medical risk factors include TIA, irregular pulse, diabetes and fibromuscular dysplasia (which reduces blood flow through the arteries). Third are lifestyle risk factors, these include high blood pressure, which is the most important known risk factor for stroke, high cholesterol, smoking, being overweight or obese, lack of activity, having an unhealthy diet (including too much salt) and drinking more than the recommended amount of alcohol.³

Ways you can reduce your risk

The first step to protect yourself against having a stroke is to understand your risk factors. While some things may be out of our hands, there are many areas in which you can take some control.

- 1) Get your blood pressure checked.** The Stroke Foundation recommends "knowing your numbers" and having a doctor check your blood pressure regularly. High blood pressure need urgent attention either by taking medication or making some lifestyle changes. Talk to a doctor about what is best for you.
- 2) Make general lifestyle changes.** Lifestyle changes are good for a number of health-related conditions, not just to avoid the risk of a stroke. Keep your weight within a healthy range, eat well and stay active. Quit smoking and stay within recommended alcohol limits.
- 3) Know your risk.** Consider whether you have adequate insurance such as life, trauma, total and permanent disability and income protection to protect what you value most in life.

If you'd like to know more about what cover options are best for you, speak to your financial adviser.

1. <https://strokefoundation.org.au/about-stroke/learn/facts-and-figures>
2. <https://strokefoundation.org.au/about-stroke/learn/what-is-a-stroke>
3. <https://strokefoundation.org.au/about-stroke/prevent-stroke/high-blood-pressure>