

8 ways to prevent stroke and spot its warning signs

4 May 2021, by Sarah Songsarah Song, Md, Mph



Credit: Rush University Medical Center

A few years back, I saw a young man whose wife—who is in the medical field—called 911 after recognizing his symptoms of weakness and numbness as a possible stroke.

As a result, he got to the hospital quickly and was treated with an intravenous clot-busting drug called tissue plasminogen activator, or tPA, which is the only urgent medication for stroke approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. When I saw him after his discharge, he was in great health with no residual effects. He spoke of playing with his young son and how blessed he felt to have recovered completely.

Know the signs

It was handy that my patient was married to someone who knew the signs of stroke. But everyone, not just medical professionals, can recognize most strokes by following the FAST acronym. In fact, a study showed that the FAST acronym can identify up to 89% of all strokes—all we have to do is learn it.

- Face drooping (usually on one side)

- Arm weakness (the arm may drift down or feel numb)
- Speech difficulty (slurred speech or trouble getting words out or understanding others)
- Time to call 911

Knowing what FAST stands for can make all the difference in stroke recovery and survival.

If you observe or experience any of these symptoms, call 911 immediately and jot down the time you noticed the symptoms. Knowing when symptoms started, down to the minute, helps in making quick, [difficult decisions](#) in the ER.

Evidence shows that the sooner a stroke can be treated with tPA, the more likely you are to get back to your normal self. Remember, a stroke is like a [heart attack](#) in your brain.

Strategies for preventing stroke

In addition to educating my patients about how to look for the symptoms of stroke, I also talk to them about what they can do to lower their risk. Along with staying on top of stroke risk factors, such as [high blood pressure](#), [high cholesterol](#) and diabetes, the following are a few strategies I share with them:

1. Quit smoking: I encourage my patients who smoke to quit and recommend smoking cessation strategies for them.
2. Stay active: Choose your favorite activity, for 30 minutes a day, five times a week.
3. Maintain a healthy weight: It is important to maintain a healthy weight, especially around the middle. This "central obesity" is associated with diabetes, high cholesterol and high blood pressure, and is linked to increased stroke risk. The best diet is one centered on vegetables, whole grains and low saturated fats.
4. Limit alcohol consumption: When drinking, no more than two drinks per day for men,

and one for women.

5. **Stress less:** Stress can spike blood pressure. To keep [blood pressure](#) low and minimize negative effects of stress, incorporate habits, such as stretching, meditation, or talking with friends—whatever works for you.
6. **Manage [atrial fibrillation](#):** For people who have atrial fibrillation, a common heart arrhythmia in older adults, I may prescribe a blood thinner if they have other risk factors or history of stroke. AFib, as it's known, causes blood to pool and clot in the heart instead of being pumped efficiently to the rest of the body, so a [blood](#) thinner can help reduce stroke risk.
7. **Be mindful of estrogen:** For women of reproductive age who smoke, experience migraines, or have a history of [stroke](#), I recommend alternative forms of birth control to oral contraceptives, as estrogen can increase the risk of clots.
8. **Learn FAST now:** Make a pact to learn the FAST acronym, as described above, and share that knowledge with the ones you love. Be an active participant in your own health so you can enjoy life to its fullest.

Also, always ask your doctor if you have any questions—he or she is there to help you.

Provided by Rush University Medical Center

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