

Stroke

Every year, an estimated 150,000 people in the UK have a stroke. That's one person every five minutes. Most people affected are over 65, but anyone can have a stroke, including children and even babies. Around 1000 people under 30 have a stroke each year.

Stroke is the third most common cause of death in the UK. It is also a leading cause of severe adult disability. More than 250,000 people in the UK live with disabilities caused by stroke.

It could happen to you, or someone you care for. If it does, you'll want to know as much as you can about strokes. This section explains what a stroke is, what causes it, and what you should do.

While most people are familiar with the term "heart attack" they are less familiar with the "brain attack" - the similarities are obvious and we should treat those with a brain attack (stroke) as energetically as we do patients who have had a heart attack – the treatments these days are also very similar



A stroke is a brain attack

A stroke is what happens when the blood supply to part of the brain is cut off. Blood carries essential nutrients and oxygen to the brain. Without a blood supply, brain cells can be damaged or destroyed and won't be able to do their job.

Because the brain controls everything the body does, damage to the brain will affect body functions. For example, if a stroke damages the part of the brain that controls how limbs move, limb movement will be affected.

The brain also controls how we think, learn, feel and [communicate](#). A stroke can also affect mental processes.

A stroke is sudden and the effects on the body are immediate.

Stroke can cause brain tissue to die, and this is called cerebral infarction. An infarct is an area of dead tissue. It can be tiny or affect a larger part of the brain.

Common symptoms

The first signs that someone has had a stroke are very sudden. Symptoms include:

- numbness, weakness or paralysis on one side of the body (signs of this may be a drooping arm, leg or lower eyelid, or a dribbling mouth)
- slurred speech or difficulty finding words or understanding speech
- sudden blurred vision or loss of sight
- confusion or unsteadiness
- a severe headache.

Use the Face-Arm-Speech Test (FAST)

Three simple checks can help you recognise whether someone has had a stroke or mini-stroke (transient ischaemic attack - TIA).



F Facial weakness: Can the person smile? Has their mouth or an eye drooped? (the picture is a good example)

A Arm weakness: Can the person raise both arms? Ask them to do this together – if both arms don't go up together when they could do the day before one arm may be weak

S Speech problems: Can the person speak clearly and understand what you say? Ask them to say a simple sentence "is the sun shining today and is it warm"

T Test these symptoms.

If you see any of these signs, call 999 immediately.

If you are uncertain call NHS Direct for further advice

Stroke can happen to anyone

A stroke can happen with no obvious cause, to people of any age - but there are factors known to increase the likelihood of it happening. Some of these factors are things that can't be changed. Other risks may be reduced by lifestyle changes or medication.

What cannot be changed



- Sex
In people aged under 75, more men have strokes than women.
- Age
Strokes are more common in people over 55, and the risk continues to rise with age. Arteries harden and become 'furred up' by a build-up of cholesterol and other debris (atherosclerosis) over many years.
- Family history

Having a close relative who has had a stroke increases the risk, possibly because conditions such as [high blood pressure](#) and [diabetes](#) tend to run in families.

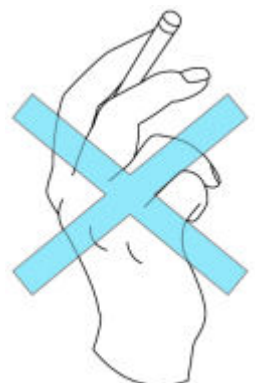
Ethnic background

People from Asian, African and [African-Caribbean](#) communities are at greater risk of a stroke.

Medical conditions like diabetes and high blood pressure are also more common in some races.

What we can do to help ourselves

- [Diet](#)
A diet high in fatty foods causes cholesterol to build up in the blood and the arteries to narrow. Too much salt can lead to high blood pressure. Being very overweight (obese) puts extra strain on the heart.
Too much [alcohol](#)
Regular heavy drinking raises blood pressure. Binge drinking (drinking a lot of alcohol in a short time) can cause a blood vessel in the brain to burst.
- [Exercise](#)
An inactive lifestyle can contribute to furring of the arteries. Regular exercise helps keep the heart and bloodstream healthy.
- [Smoking](#)
Smoking causes higher blood pressure and makes the blood thicker. The chemicals in tobacco smoke are absorbed into the body, damaging blood vessel walls.



What treatments are available?

If the stroke has been caused by a blood clot then there is a treatment which more and more hospitals are beginning to use.

It is because of this treatment that ask people to call 999 if you are with anyone who develops any of the symptoms of a stroke (FAS Test)

Ambulance staff will need to know when the symptoms started and need to get you into hospital within 2 to 3 hours of the start of the symptoms

A particular scan may be undertaken in the hospital and if the cause is shown to be a blood clot then a clot busting drug similar to the one used in heart attacks can be used

Other forms of treatment can be provided by the hospital and are also very important to patients as they recover from a stroke

More information can be obtained from the Stroke Association www.stroke.org.uk