

## Stroke Awareness



Knowing what causes a stroke, what you can do to prevent one and what to do if you or someone else may be experiencing a stroke could save a life – possibly even yours. We encourage you to take a few minutes to learn about stroke and make a commitment to yourself to improve your health and take steps toward preventing a stroke from happening to you.

### What is a Stroke?

A stroke occurs when a part of your brain does not get enough oxygen. This can happen in one of two ways—when blood flow to the brain is blocked by a clogged blood vessel (ischemic stroke) or when a blood vessel in the brain bursts, causing blood to leak into the brain (hemorrhagic stroke). Ischemic strokes are much more common than hemorrhagic strokes, but both types prevent the brain from getting the oxygen it needs to function properly.

A transient ischemic attack (TIA) is often referred to as a "mini-stroke," and it is often a warning of a future stroke. According to [Mark K. Eskandari, MD](#), a vascular surgeon with the [Bluhm Cardiovascular Institute](#) at Northwestern Memorial Hospital, a TIA will often cause the same symptoms as a stroke does, but the symptoms will disappear quickly rather than continue. Any suspected TIA should be evaluated as soon as possible by a healthcare professional who can evaluate you and make a proper diagnosis.

### Symptoms

Knowing the symptoms of a stroke could save your or someone else's life. According to the [American Stroke Association](#), the most common warning signs of a stroke are:

- Sudden numbness or weakness of the face, arm or leg, especially on one side of the body
- Sudden confusion, trouble speaking or understanding
- Sudden trouble seeing in one eye
- Sudden trouble walking, dizziness or loss of balance or coordination
- Sudden, severe headache with no known cause

### Causes

A primary cause of a stroke is atherosclerosis (hardening of the artery) of the carotid artery. The carotid arteries are the two arteries in the neck that carry blood to the brain. When those arteries are narrowed or blocked, usually by atherosclerosis, it is considered carotid artery disease. Atherosclerosis is a build-up of fatty deposits (plaques) in the arteries that narrows them and makes blood flow more difficult. Uncontrolled hypertension (high blood pressure) and atrial fibrillation (an abnormal heart rhythm) can also lead to a stroke.

## Immediate Treatment for Stroke is Essential

If you or someone else is having some or all of the above symptoms, it's critical to **call 9-1-1** or your emergency service immediately. Do not delay. Do not worry about being embarrassed if the symptoms turn out to be something other than a stroke – it's always better to be safe than sorry.

When someone is having a stroke, the sooner they are treated, the greater their chances are of having a complete recovery or experiencing limited damage will be. If a stroke is treated within three hours with a drug called tPA (considered a "clot busting" drug), most patients will do very well, but that drug will not be as effective after three hours from the onset of the stroke, so time truly is of the essence.

## Stroke Prevention - What You Can Do to Control Your Risk

Stroke is the third leading cause of death in the United States, behind heart disease and cancer, but it doesn't have to be. The majority of strokes could be prevented with medical treatment, lifestyle changes or both. According to [Judith L. Meadows, MD](#), a cardiologist at the Bluhm Cardiovascular Institute who specializes in vascular medicine, high blood pressure is the number one predictor of stroke, so it is important for anyone with high blood pressure to take steps to control it. Prevention of stroke includes:

- Controlling blood pressure
- Controlling cholesterol and blood sugar
- Not smoking
- Eating a healthy diet
- Taking an aspirin a day (check with your doctor before beginning an aspirin regimen, as there are some people who should not take aspirin)
- Working with your doctor to come up with a treatment plan that works best for you to address your individual risks

## Medical & Surgical Treatment & Management

Dr. Meadows would like to remind everyone that you don't have to wait until you're not feeling well to see a doctor. "We encourage everyone to take an active part in maintaining and improving their physical health by seeing their doctor regularly." At Northwestern Memorial Hospital, primary prevention of a stroke, which is preventing a first stroke before it happens, is often managed in the [Center for Vascular Disease](#). Here, physicians and surgeons who specialize in stroke prevention will work with you to prevent a stroke and other health problems related to your arteries and veins. "We treat the whole patient using a multidisciplinary approach because atherosclerosis is a disease that affects the entire body," says Dr. Meadows.

Drs. Eskandari and Meadows stress the importance of prevention in hopes that people will take steps to avoid worsening carotid artery disease before they have a stroke or require a surgical procedure to unblock the arteries. When a person has severe carotid artery disease, surgery is often performed to correct arterial blockages. Surgeons may elect one of two procedures - a [carotid artery endarterectomy](#), also known as a CEA or [carotid artery angioplasty or stenting](#), also known as CAS.

In addition to receiving cardiovascular care, stroke prevention and treatment often includes work with neurologists. Thanks to the leadership of [Mark J. Alberts, MD](#), [Richard A. Bernstein, MD](#) and other neurologists and staff who have improved the quality of care we provide to stroke patients, Northwestern Memorial has been awarded certification as a Primary Stroke Center through [The Joint Commission](#). This means we meet or exceed the high standards for a stroke center, and we have successfully demonstrated our stroke care quality. Additionally, our Emergency Department is a [Level 1 Trauma & Stroke Center](#), which is the highest level of trauma center designation offered by the [American College of Surgeons](#).

Learn more about the quality of care we provide by visiting the [stroke section of our Quality Report Card](#).

## Lifestyle Changes

Although some risk factors for stroke, such as age, are unavoidable, there are some risk factors you can control.

### Improve Your Diet

You hear it everywhere – eating a healthy diet will help with so many things. But what is a healthy diet? Low fat? Low sodium? High protein? Fruits and veggies all day, every day? We know that all of the information out there can make anyone struggle with separating the truth from fiction, so we recommend that you talk with your doctor or consult a nutritionist at the Center for Lifestyle Medicine to find out what will work best for you and your lifestyle. Cardiologists at Northwestern Memorial join with the [National Institutes of Health](#) and other experts to recommend the [DASH diet](#) for anyone with hypertension or other stroke risk factors to reduce your blood pressure and increase your overall health.

### Exercise Regularly

Daily aerobic exercise is important for all aspects of your health, and as a bonus, it can make you feel better – mentally, physically and emotionally. You don't have to run marathons to get enough exercise; simply taking a brisk walk, riding your bike, swimming or engaging in any activity that elevates your heart rate will do. Experts recommend an hour a day, but don't let that number scare you into inactivity. You can break the hour up into smaller parts, and remember that any exercise is better than none. If you don't currently exercise, and you'd like to start, we recommend that you talk with your doctor to discuss your plans.

### Quit Smoking

If you smoke and you need help [learning to quit](#), we encourage you to do whatever it takes to kick the habit. Not only will it reduce your risk of stroke, it will also reduce your risk of many other health problems related to tobacco use.

## Contact

If you do not have a doctor and would like to make an appointment with a Northwestern Memorial Hospital physician, call our Physician Referral Department at **1-877-926-4664** or [request a first time appointment online](#).