

Healthful Tips

10 Ways To Prevent Strokes

Changing Life Can Lower Risk

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According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, stroke is the No. 10 cause of serious, long-term disability in the United States. Over the course of a lifetime, stroke affects an estimated four of five families. Although these statistics sound dire, take heart. With these strategies, you can help your parents reduce their risk -- and reduce your own at the same time.

Control blood pressure-High blood pressure means a high risk of stroke. If one of your parents has been diagnosed with pre hypertension (120/80 to 139/89) or hypertension (140/90 or higher), his blood pressure should be treated. The doctor will prescribe the appropriate medications, but your parent's [blood pressure needs regular monitoring](#). Although it can be a bit tricky to use, an inexpensive manual cuff -- starting at about \$12 at your local drugstore -- is a great way to monitor blood pressure at home. But if you can't get the hang of using it, you may want to consider investing in a blood pressure machine, which is a bit more expensive, between \$70 and \$150. It's also available at your local drugstore.

Manage stress and depression-A parent's emotional and psychological state can [have a very real effect on his physical health](#). Minimizing stress, anger and depression is an important aspect of maintaining good cardiovascular health and avoiding a stroke. If your parent lives by himself, he may feel disconnected and alone. Even if your parents still have each other, sitting around the house can lead to boredom and unhappiness. Help your parents get out, make new friends or simply engage in stimulating activities. Their local church or community center is an excellent place to connect with other seniors.

Perhaps your parent is already a social butterfly but still seems to be having difficulty with his mood. Encourage him to try these stress-busting strategies:

- Cut back on caffeinated beverages and alcohol
- Try meditation or yoga
- Play relaxing music
- Go for a walk outdoors

If you've tried everything and still feel concerned about your parent's mood, talk to his doctor. Depression is a serious but treatable illness.

Reduce the risk of blood clots-Ask your parents' doctor about medications that can reduce their risk of developing blood clots. The most commonly recommended medication is aspirin, which is inexpensive and can be taken at a low dose. Eighty-one milligrams is the usual recommended dose. If your parents have other medical issues, the doctor may prescribe a more potent drug.

Control other medical conditions-If your parents have atrial fibrillation, an abnormal rhythm involving the upper two chambers of the heart, diabetes, heart valve disease or vascular disease, they have a much greater risk of stroke. These medical conditions require careful management. Make sure their doctor knows about any such conditions and is treating them appropriately.

Talk to the doctor about medications that might increase your parents' risk-Hormone replacement therapy, rosiglitazone for diabetes, and COX-2 inhibitors for controlling arthritis

pain are all examples of medications that may increase your parents' risk of stroke. Review their medications with their doctor and ask if there are less risky alternatives.

Know the early warning signs and seek treatment to prevent a stroke-According to the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, one out of three people who have a transient ischemic attack, known as TIA, will suffer an acute stroke. Signs of a TIA, or mini stroke, include:

- 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 out of one or both eyes
- Sudden difficulty walking, loss of balance or coordination, dizziness

Keep "bad" cholesterol levels low-One of the major risk factors for stroke is a high bloodstream level of LDL, or "bad" cholesterol. Ideally, your parent's total cholesterol should be no more than 200 mg/dL (milligrams per deciliter) and no more than five times the level of HDL or "good" cholesterol; his LDL levels should be below 70 mg/dL. Make sure his cholesterol levels are checked regularly and treated if necessary. Following a low-fat diet and exercising regularly may help, but it might not be enough. If his cholesterol levels don't respond to lifestyle changes, his doctor may prescribe medication.

Follow a heart-healthy diet-The best diet for preventing stroke is the one recommended by the American Heart Association. Choose a diet rich in whole grains, vegetables, fruits, fish, poultry, lean meats and low-fat or fat-free dairy products. Your parent should limit intake of fat (total fat between 25 and 35 percent of daily calories, saturated fat less than 7 percent, and trans fat less than 1 percent), cholesterol (less than 200 milligrams per day if LDL levels are high, less than 300 milligrams per day if they aren't) and sodium (less than 1,500 milligrams per day for high blood pressure, less than 2,300 milligrams per day otherwise). Your mother should consume no more than one alcoholic beverage per day, your father no more than two. And they should each eat 25 to 30 grams of dietary fiber every day.

Encourage regular exercise-Exercise is essential for general cardiovascular health and is key to preventing a stroke. But how much exercise is enough? The Centers for Disease Control and the American Heart Association recommend accumulating at least 30 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity at least five days a week on most days. This doesn't mean your parents need to do half an hour of aerobics five days a week; instead, you can encourage short bursts of activity throughout the day. Just parking farther away from the store and walking the extra distance, or taking the stairs instead of the elevator, can quickly add up. But before your parents begin any exercise program, they should talk to their doctor about any restrictions they might have.

Help them stop smoking-Smoking is one of the biggest risk factors for stroke. If your parents or anyone who lives in their home smokes, quitting is essential to good health. Just living with a smoker increases the risk of stroke by almost 30 percent. But recognize that stopping smoking isn't easy. Here are a few ways you can help:

- Ask your parents what they think would make it easier for them. They may have suggestions you haven't thought of
- Encourage them to talk about their feelings and what they're going through. Smoking may be a comforting lifelong habit; let them mourn a little
- You may be tempted to nag or yell if they slip up, but it's more effective to remind them that you love them no matter what. Be positive and encouraging -- and vent your frustration to a friend instead

- Help them avoid situations that trigger the desire for a smoke. If they're used to enjoying a cigarette after meals, try going for a short walk outside instead
- Be understanding as they go through withdrawal symptoms. Try not to take it personally if they're especially irritable, short-tempered, and tired
- Quit smoking yourself. If you must smoke, don't smoke around your parents. Not only will it make quitting more difficult for them, but the secondhand smoke will increase their risk of heart attack
- If your parents find it too difficult to quit on their own, talk to their doctor. Nicotine replacement therapy, support groups, and counseling may all be helpful