



This article was produced in collaboration with the Public Health Agency of Canada.

STROKE

The Issue

Stroke is one of the leading causes of death in Canada. The risk of stroke increases with age, but in many cases lifestyle changes can decrease your chances of having a stroke.

Background

Most strokes occur when a blood clot blocks a blood vessel in the brain, interrupting the supply of blood and oxygen to the brain cells in the area. The breaking of a blood vessel in the brain and the resulting bleeding can also cause a stroke. In both types of stroke, brain cells may die, causing the parts of the body they control to stop functioning.

Between 40,000 and 50,000 Canadians are hospitalized each year for strokes, and about 15,000 of these are fatal. In 2003, about 272,000 Canadians 12 years of age and older were living with the effects of having a stroke.

Although strokes can occur in children, the risk of stroke increases with age. After age 55 your risk of stroke doubles every 10 years. Males have a slightly higher prevalence of living with the effects of having a stroke than females in all age groups, in total 51% males, 49% females. However, 59% of stroke deaths occur in women, likely because women live longer, and men are more likely to die from other causes.

A stroke survivor has a 20% chance of having another stroke within two years.

Symptoms of Stroke

The main warning signs of a stroke are:

- sudden weakness, numbness and/or tingling in the face, arm or leg;
- sudden temporary loss of speech or trouble understanding speech;
- sudden loss of vision, particularly in one eye, or double vision;

- sudden severe and unusual headache; and
- unsteadiness or a sudden fall, especially with any of the above signs.

If you experience any of these signs, see your doctor or go to hospital immediately. There is now medication that, if administered in the early stages of a stroke, can help minimize the effects.

Health Risks of Stroke

Although the risk of stroke increases with age, the risk also rises if you:

- smoke;
- have high blood pressure;
- have hardening of the arteries;
- have heart disease;
- have diabetes; or
- have a family history of heart problems.

Health Effects of Stroke

Strokes affect people in different ways, depending on the type of stroke, the area of the brain which is affected and the size of the damaged area.

The common effects of a stroke include:

- paralysis or weakness on one side of the body;
- vision problems;
- trouble speaking or understanding language;
- inability to recognize or use familiar objects
- tiredness;
- depression;
- exaggerated or inappropriate emotional responses;



- difficulty learning and remembering new information; and
- changes in personality.

Rehabilitation is an important part of recovery from a stroke and should begin as soon as possible. While a stroke usually leaves after-effects, in many cases the brain can learn to compensate for the damaged area.

Minimizing Your Risk

Lifestyle changes can increase your chances of avoiding a stroke.

- If you smoke, your blood pressure temporarily rises with each cigarette. Smoking also leads to hardening of the arteries, which also increases your risk of stroke.
- High blood pressure is the most important controllable risk factor, so have your blood pressure checked regularly.
- If you have high blood pressure, take steps to lower it and take your medication as prescribed.
- A high fibre, low-salt and low-fat diet will help keep your blood pressure down. Salt causes the body to retain water, which increases blood pressure.
- Avoid convenience foods such as canned soup which may contain high levels of salt. Avoid smoked, cured or corned meats which are also high in salt. Read the labels on food products for the sodium content.
- Reduce animal and dairy fat while increasing your intake of fresh fruits and vegetables.
- Achieve and maintain a healthy weight.
- At any age, regular moderate physical activity can help lower and even prevent high blood pressure. Start slowly and build up activity. Talk to your doctor before you start on any new physical activity routine.
- Excessive amounts of alcohol (more than two drinks a day) can increase

blood pressure and the risk of a stroke. Limit your alcohol intake.

- Many common over-the-counter remedies can increase blood pressure. Read labels carefully and tell your doctor and pharmacist about any medication you are taking.
- If you have diabetes, make the recommended diet changes and take the medication you are prescribed to keep it under control.
- If you have a family history of heart disease or stroke, have regular medical check-ups so that any risk factor is diagnosed early.

Public Health Agency of Canada's Role

The Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) is committed to promoting and protecting the health of Canadians through leadership, partnership, innovation and action in public health. It promotes stroke awareness as part of this overall commitment. PHAC works with stakeholders at all levels to provide Canadian and international leadership in prevention and control of chronic diseases, including stroke, through integrated policy and program development, surveillance, and knowledge development and dissemination.

PHAC's Division of Aging and Seniors is specifically dedicated to seniors' health promotion. It offers seniors practical information on all types of conditions that may arise or worsen with age, including stroke.

Need More Info?

For more information on stroke, go to:

Public Health Agency of Canada's Centre for Chronic Disease Prevention and Control (CCDPC) Heart Disease and Stroke Web site at:
http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/ccdpc-cpcmc/topics/cvd-heart-stroke_e.html

The Public Health Agency, The Healthy Heart Kit :
<http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/ccdpc-cpcmc/hhk-tcs/index.html>

Health Canada's Heart and Stroke site :
http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/dc-ma/heart-coeur/index_e.html

The Canadian Health Network at :
<http://www.canadian-health-network.ca/>
and search for "Stroke"

Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada :
www.heartandstroke.ca

Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada. "The Changing Face of Heart Disease and Stroke in Canada 2000." Ottawa: October 1999. :
http://dsp-psd.pwgsc.gc.ca/Collection/H88-3-30-2001/pdfs/age/face_e.pdf

Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada. "The Growing Burden of Heart Disease and Stroke in Canada 2003." Ottawa: May 2003. :
http://www.cvdinfobase.ca/cvdbook/CVD_En03.pdf

For more information on seniors' health, go to the Public Health Agency of Canada, Division of Aging and Seniors at:
www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/seniors-aines

For additional articles on health and safety issues go to the It's Your Health Web site at:
www.healthcanada.gc.ca/iyh
You can also call toll free at 1-866-225-0709
or TTY at 1-800-267-1245*