

# Hispanic Americans and Stroke Risk



Talking about strokes can be scary. But strokes are very common. They happen every 40 seconds in the United States and affect almost 800,000 people a year.

Those numbers disproportionately affect Hispanic Americans. Stroke is the 4th leading cause of death for Hispanic American men and the 3rd leading cause of death for Hispanic American women.

While this sounds upsetting, you're not fated to have a stroke just because you're Hispanic American. Understanding your risk factors and knowing what you can do to lower them may help prevent strokes.

## What is a stroke?

A stroke happens when blood flow to your brain is blocked or when there's sudden bleeding in your brain. Your brain can't get enough oxygen or nutrients, which causes some brain cells to die. A stroke can cause permanent brain damage and disability, or even death.

## Why Hispanic Americans are more at risk

Hispanic Americans are more likely to have certain conditions that raise the risk of having a stroke. These include:

**Carrying extra weight.** Around 80% of Hispanic American adults over the age of 20 are considered medically overweight or obese. Extra fatty tissue can cause inflammation, which creates problems with blood flow. In addition, people carrying extra weight are also more likely to have other health conditions that raise their risk of stroke. Some of these conditions include high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, or sleep apnea.

**High blood pressure.** Almost 60% of Hispanic Americans have high blood pressure. High blood pressure happens when there's too much pressure in your arteries and your heart works too hard. As a result, arteries to your brain can burst or become blocked.

**High cholesterol.** Nearly 30% of Hispanic American adults have high levels of LDL, or "bad," cholesterol. Cholesterol is a waxy substance that your body needs to build cells. But if you have too much, it can block blood flow to your brain.

**Type 2 diabetes.** Hispanic American adults are more likely to develop type 2 diabetes at a younger age than other American adults. People with diabetes are twice as likely to have a stroke than people who don't have it.

There are other reasons why Hispanic American adults may have higher death rates from stroke. They include:

**Less frequent medical care.** Men in general see their healthcare providers less than women. This is especially common among men who are Hispanic American. Seeing your provider regularly can help you determine if you have any risk factors for stroke, like high blood pressure or high cholesterol.

**Social determinants of health.** These are also called social drivers of health. These are nonmedical factors that affect your health. They include:

- Education
- Access to health care
- Language barriers
- The neighborhood you live in
- Your social community

These can all affect your ability to eat healthy food, get medicines you need, see your provider, stay physically active, and relieve stress. If English isn't your first language, for example, you may not understand what your

provider tells you. If your neighborhood doesn't have affordable supermarkets and places to safely walk, you may not be able to get enough physical activity or easily find healthy food.

## How you can protect yourself

Remember, just because you're Hispanic American doesn't mean you will have a stroke. There are many things you can do to help prevent a stroke. Taking the following steps may significantly lower your chances of having a stroke.

**Reduce high blood pressure.** Ideally, your blood pressure should be under 120/80 mm Hg. Your provider may want you to take medicine to lower your blood pressure. It's important to take your medicines as directed and track your blood pressure numbers at home.

**Get to a healthy weight.** Your provider can help you figure out what weight is right for you and can help you make a plan to lose weight if you need to.

**Move most days of the week.** The American Heart Association recommends at least 150 minutes of aerobic activity each week. These are activities that get your blood pumping, such as a 30-minute walk 5 times a week. You should also do muscle-strengthening activities such as lifting weights at least 2 times a week. This type of movement can help lower blood pressure.

**Eat heart-healthy food.** Focus on fruit, veggies, and low-fat dairy, as well as eating foods with lower saturated and total fat content. You should also reduce the amount of salt you eat. You want to stay under 1,500 mg of salt per day.

**Stop smoking.** It nearly doubles the risk of stroke. Ask your healthcare provider for tips and resources to help you quit.

## Know the signs of stroke

Recognizing possible stroke symptoms can save your life. The sooner you arrive at the emergency room for care, the better your chances of recovery. Ideally, it's best to receive treatment for a stroke within the first 3 hours after your symptoms start. How do you know if your symptoms may be a sign of a stroke? Remember: **B.E. F.A.S.T.**, which stands for:

**B - Balance.** Sudden loss of balance or coordination. You may feel dizzy or have difficulty walking.

**E - Eyes.** Vision changes in one or both eyes.

**F - Face drooping.** One side of the face is drooping or numb. When you smile, the smile is uneven.

**A - Arm weakness.** One arm is weak or numb. When you lift both arms at the same time, one arm may drift downward.

**S - Speech difficulty.** You may have slurred speech or difficulty speaking. You can't repeat a simple sentence correctly when asked.

**T - Time to call 911.** If you show any of these symptoms, call **911** immediately. Have someone else call if needed. Call even if the symptoms go away. Make note of the time the symptoms first appeared.

Although some risk factors can't be changed, there are many things you can do to reduce your stroke risk. Talk with your healthcare provider about your individual risk factors and what steps you can take to help prevent a stroke.

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