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**STROKE  
ACTION**



**IRISH HEART  
FOUNDATION**

# PREVENTING A STROKE



Every year, about 10,000 people in Ireland have a stroke. Stroke is the biggest cause of acquired disability and the third biggest cause of death in this country.

Stroke can happen at any age. One third of strokes happen in people under sixty-five years of age.

**Some people are more at risk of having a stroke if they have certain medical conditions.**



Your risk of having a stroke is increased by certain things in your lifestyle which you can change, such as lowering your blood pressure, stopping smoking and managing your weight. Your risk of stroke is also increased by factors which you cannot change, such as your age and family history.

Some people are more at risk of having a stroke if they have certain medical conditions. It is important that these conditions are carefully monitored and treated.

The good news is that by making small changes to your lifestyle and by taking medicines for certain conditions as directed by your doctor, you can reduce your risk of stroke.

# Lifestyle factors – risks for stroke that you can change

## **High blood pressure (Hypertension)**

High blood pressure or hypertension is the leading cause of stroke. High blood pressure causes your blood vessels to lose their elasticity. The stiffening and narrowing of arteries can result in a blockage or clot forming. The weakening in the walls of small blood vessels can cause bleeds to occur. Clots and bleeds can cause strokes.

## **High cholesterol**

Cholesterol is a type of fat found in your blood. You need a certain amount of cholesterol in your body. There are two main types of cholesterol – HDL or good cholesterol and LDL or bad cholesterol. Good cholesterol mops up the cholesterol left behind in your arteries and carries it to the liver where it is broken down. Bad cholesterol sticks to the walls in your arteries making them narrow. If an artery to your brain is completely blocked it can cause a stroke.

## **Smoking**

Smoking doubles your risk of stroke. Smoking causes your blood vessels to narrow and makes your blood more likely to clot. Fatty deposits build up faster in the blood vessels of smokers compared to non-smokers. Second-hand smoke also increases your risk of stroke. Five years after you stop smoking your risk of a stroke is similar to that of a non-smoker.

## **Alcohol**

Drinking too much alcohol raises your blood pressure, which is the leading cause of stroke. It can also lead to atrial fibrillation, a type of irregular heartbeat that can increase your risk of stroke.

## **Unhealthy eating habits**

Eating too much salt increases your risk of developing high blood pressure. Eating foods high in saturated fats (butter, hard margarine, lard, cream, fatty meat, cakes, biscuits and chocolates) can raise your cholesterol levels. Too many extra calories in your diet can lead to weight gain, obesity, high blood pressure and Type 2 diabetes mellitus.



## **Physical inactivity**

Not being active on a regular basis increases your risk of stroke by 50%. Regular physical activity reduces your blood pressure and reduces your risk of stroke and heart attack.

## **Diabetes**

If you have diabetes you have a greater risk of stroke. Diabetes occurs when your blood sugar (glucose) is too high. Insulin, a hormone produced by your body, helps to control your blood glucose. If your body does not produce enough insulin, or your body does not respond well to insulin the sugar levels in your blood rise.

## **Atrial fibrillation (irregular heartbeat)**

Atrial fibrillation (AF) is a type of irregular heartbeat. The cause of AF is not always clear, but you have a greater risk of developing it if you have high blood pressure, diabetes or heart disease. AF can cause blood to clot. A blood clot can enter your bloodstream and get stuck in a blood vessel supplying your brain. This blockage may then cause a stroke to occur.

# Risk factors for stroke that you cannot change

## Age

As you get older your blood vessels harden and become less elastic which puts you at increased risk of stroke and heart disease. Atrial fibrillation is also more common in older people. Two thirds of strokes happen to people aged 65 years and older.

## Gender

Stroke is more common in men under 75 years of age than in women of the same age. However, in those over 75 years of age, more women than men have strokes.

## Family history

You are more at risk of having a stroke if one or more of your parents, grandparents, sisters or brothers have had a stroke.

## Ethnicity (race)

People from African, Asian and African-Caribbean communities have a higher risk of having high blood pressure and diabetes which are risk factors for stroke.

**You are more at risk of having a stroke if one or more of your parents, grandparents, sisters or brothers have had a stroke.**

### **Medical conditions**

A number of medical conditions increase your risk of stroke. Your doctor may prescribe medicines to manage these conditions.

### **Other diseases of the heart**

Having heart disease or heart failure increases your risk of stroke. Dilated cardiomyopathy (weakened and enlarged heart) and disease of the heart valves also increase the risk of stroke.

**Having heart disease or heart failure increase your risk of stroke.**



# How can you reduce your risk of stroke?

By making small changes to your lifestyle you can reduce your risk of having a stroke and can prevent repeat strokes.

## **Know your blood pressure**

The only way to find out if you have high blood pressure is to have it measured. If you are over 30, you should have your blood pressure checked at least every five years. Your doctor can measure your blood pressure.

## **What is high blood pressure?**

About half of Irish adults over 45 years of age have high blood pressure. Blood pressure shows the amount of work your heart has to do to pump blood around the body. Two numbers measure the level of a person's blood pressure. One number records blood pressure at its highest point as the heart muscle squeezes out the blood from your heart. This is called systolic pressure. The other number records the blood pressure as your heart relaxes and allows the blood to flow back into your heart. This is called diastolic pressure.

## **What is a normal level of blood pressure?**

The normal level of blood pressure is usually about 120 (systolic) over 80 (diastolic), but this can vary with age, how you feel and your level of activity. If your blood pressure is higher than 140 over 90 (140 over 80 if you have diabetes), you should discuss this with your doctor. One high reading does not necessarily mean you have high blood pressure. Your doctor will usually want to check your blood pressure several times, before deciding whether or not you have high blood pressure.



## **What causes high blood pressure?**

A number of factors combine to cause high blood pressure. These include age, family history, eating too much salt, not eating enough fruit and vegetables, drinking too much alcohol, being overweight and not taking enough physical activity.

## **Medicines for high blood pressure**

If you have been prescribed medicine for high blood pressure, you will usually have to take it for your whole life. Medicine that lowers blood pressure prevents early ageing of your blood vessels and heart and reduces your risk of stroke.

See our booklets: ***Manage your blood pressure*** and ***Step by step through heart medicines***, for more information.

## **Manage or reduce your cholesterol**

Keeping your cholesterol at a healthy level can reduce your risk of stroke. Your doctor can measure your cholesterol. A healthy total cholesterol level is 5 mmol/l or less (4.5 mmol/l or less if you have heart disease or diabetes).

Eating too much saturated (animal) fat and too many foods from the top shelf of the Food Pyramid can increase your cholesterol level. Some people have inherited conditions that cause very high cholesterol levels. If you need to lower your cholesterol, your doctor will advise you on changes in lifestyle and may recommend medicine.

See our booklets: ***A healthy cholesterol*** and ***Step by step through inherited heart disease, familial hypercholesterolaemia*** for more information.

## Quit smoking

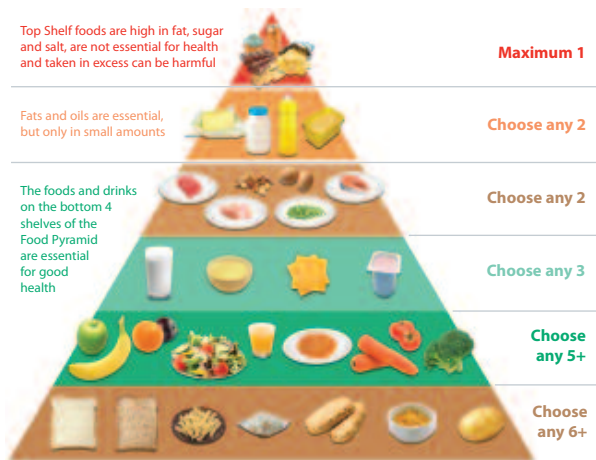
Stopping smoking will almost halve your chances of having a stroke regardless of how long you have been a smoker, or how old you are. Within 24 hours of quitting smoking, your risk of having a stroke begins to fall.



See our booklet: **Quit smoking**, for more information, or call our National Heart & Stroke Helpline on Locall 1890 432 787 or the National Smokers' Quitline on 1850 201 203 to speak to someone about quitting smoking.

## Eat healthily

Healthy eating can reduce your risk of stroke. Aim to eat a wide variety of healthy foods. Using the Food Pyramid as your guide can help make sure you get all the vitamins, minerals, fibre and goodness you need.



## Oily fish

Eat oily fish, such as sardines, mackerel, salmon or fresh tuna at least twice a week. Oily fish contains Omega 3 fat which improves blood circulation, reduces the stickiness of your blood and prevents your blood from clotting. Oily fish can help lower your triglyceride level (a type of fat in your blood).

## **Fruit and vegetables**

Aim to eat at least five portions of fruit and vegetables each day. Frozen fruit and vegetables are just as good as fresh. Eating a variety of fruit and vegetables will help control your weight and your blood pressure.



## **Reduce the amount of saturated fat you eat**

Fats in food are a mixture of saturated and unsaturated fats. Saturated fats are also called animal fats. Saturated fats are found in foods like butter, hard margarine, lard, cheese, fatty meat, cakes, biscuits and chocolates. They can raise your LDL (bad) cholesterol and lower your HDL (good) cholesterol. You can cut down on saturated fat by choosing lean cuts of meat, avoiding snack foods, processed foods and ready-made meals whose labels show they contain saturated fats and by using low fat dairy products and spreads.

## **Increase the amount of unsaturated fat you eat**

Unsaturated fats can help lower cholesterol. There are two main types of unsaturated fats, monounsaturated fat and polyunsaturated fat. Unsaturated fats are found in oily fish, sardines, mackerel, trout and salmon and pure vegetable oils such as sunflower, olive and rapeseed oils, and also in seeds and some nuts.

See our booklets: ***Health eating*** and ***A healthy cholesterol*** for more information.

### **Cut down on salt**

Eating too much salt can increase your blood pressure level, which increases your risk of stroke. Avoid adding salt to your food. Instead add flavour to food by using herbs, spices, garlic, pepper or lemon juice.

A person should eat less than 6 grams of salt in a day (about one level teaspoon). This includes salt found in processed food and snacks, as well as the salt added during cooking or at the table. Many people eat more than the recommended amount of salt per day. Most of the salt we eat comes from processed foods, fast food, or restaurant food.

See our booklet: ***Time to cut down on salt*** for more information.

### **Be a healthy weight**






It is important to be a healthy weight to reduce your risk of stroke. Being overweight increases your risk of high blood pressure and diabetes, which increases stroke risk. Even losing a small amount of excess weight can help lower your blood pressure. If you need to lose weight, aim for a gradual weight loss of one kilogram (one to two pounds) a week and watch the size of your food portions. The best way to lose weight is to cut down on the amount of fat, sugar, sweet foods and sugary drinks and aim to be more physically active.

See our booklets, ***Lose weight*** and ***Be active*** for more information.



### **Drink less alcohol**

If you drink, spread your drinking over the week and keep some days alcohol-free. Experts recommend that adult women should drink no more than 11 standard alcoholic drinks per week. Adult men should drink no more than 17 standard drinks per week.

	standard drinks
 1 Pint =	2
 Half a pint =	1
 Bottle of wine (750ml) =	7
 1 small glass of wine (100ml) =	1
 Spirits - pub single measure =	1

Remember that alcohol is a drug and may be a risk for other health problems.

1 standard drink is 10 grams of alcohol

= one half pint of beer, stout or lager

= one small glass of wine

= one pub measure of spirits (whiskey, vodka or gin)

### Be more physically active

Having an active lifestyle can reduce your risk of having a stroke. Regular physical activity helps you to lower your blood pressure, maintain a healthy weight and control blood sugar levels, and also increases levels of HDL (good) cholesterol.

#### How much activity?

To reduce your risk of stroke all adults and older people need to be active for at least 30 minutes 5 days a week, at a moderate intensity. An activity of moderate intensity will increase your breathing and heart rate. Just like when you go for a brisk walk. You can break up your 30 minutes of activity throughout the day into smaller chunks, for example, 15 minutes of walking and 15 minutes of dancing. If you are breaking up your minutes of activity each session needs to be for 10 minutes or longer to get the health benefits.



## To lose weight

If you need to lose weight, aim to be active at a moderate intensity for 60 to 75 minutes 5 days a week.

### Tips for being more active

- Choose an activity you enjoy.
- Get active with a friend.
- Set yourself a goal which is achievable, for example a walk at lunchtime three times a week.
- Listen to your body and stop your activity if you feel unwell, have pain or feel dizzy.
- Consult your doctor before starting to be more active if you are unsure which activities are most suitable for you or if you have a health problem.

See our booklet: **Be active** for more information.

## Prevent or manage diabetes

You can prevent or manage diabetes by following a healthy eating plan that is low in fat and sugar and, rich in fruit & vegetables; being more physically active; controlling your weight; and managing your blood pressure.

## Manage your stress

The link between stress and stroke is complex and not fully understood. If you feel stressed, your blood will produce more hormones. Although useful in small amounts, over time too many of these hormones can damage your blood vessels and may lead to high blood pressure. When life becomes pressurised, you are also more likely to smoke more cigarettes, drink more caffeine, drink too much alcohol and be less physically active. All of these increase your risk of stroke.

See our booklet: **Manage your stress** for more information.

## **Prevent or manage atrial fibrillation**

Atrial fibrillation is a type of irregular heartbeat or arrhythmia that increases your risk of stroke.

Symptoms can include palpitations, tiredness, shortness of breath, dizziness or feeling faint. Some people only have mild symptoms, while other people have no symptoms at all. Your doctor can check if you have AF.

Your risk of developing atrial fibrillation (AF) increases if you have high blood pressure, diabetes or heart disease. Drinking too much alcohol can also cause AF, so it is important to limit your alcohol intake and not to binge drink.

### **Medicines**

If you have been diagnosed with AF, it is possible to manage the condition and reduce your risk of stroke. It is vital to regularly take the medicines your doctor has given you, even if your symptoms improve. Depending on the type of AF you have you may be prescribed one or a combination of different types of medicines to control your symptoms.

### **Medical procedures**

There are a number of medical procedures used to treat atrial fibrillation. Your doctor may discuss these with you if he or she feels they may be suitable treatments for your type of AF. Catheter ablation is a surgical procedure that uses electrical impulses to destroy the area of your heart muscle causing AF. Cardioversion is another procedure that uses either electrical impulses or specialised drugs to try to reset your heartbeat back into its regular rhythm.

See our booklet, **AF and you** for more information.





## Please make a donation today

The Irish Heart Foundation is Ireland's national charity dedicated to the reduction of death and disability from heart disease and stroke. Over 90% of our funding comes from public and business donations. We depend on your goodwill and generosity to continue our work.

**If you found this booklet useful, please help our charity to continue to provide heart & stroke information by donating today.**

### You can make your donation today:

**By post:** Irish Heart Foundation,  
50 Ringsend Road, Dublin 4

**Online:** [www.irisheart.ie](http://www.irisheart.ie)

**By phone:** 01 6685001

### Personal Details

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Mobile: \_\_\_\_\_

### Credit or debit card (one off donation)

Amount:

€250\*  €100  €50  €25  Other € \_\_\_\_\_

Card Number:

Exp Date:  /  Security Code\*\*:

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_

\* If you donate €250 in one year (or €21 per month) we can claim tax back at no cost to you.

\*\* Last 3 digits on the signature strip on the reverse of our card.

The Irish Heart Foundation is committed to best practice in fundraising and adheres to the **statement of guiding principles for fundraising** promoting transparency, honesty and accountability. Any personal information you provide will be held in accordance with the Data Protection Acts 1988 and 2003.

## SEPA Direct Debit Mandate

**Unique Mandate Reference:**

**Creditor Identifier: IE02ZZZ306322**

By signing this mandate form, you authorise (A) the Irish Heart Foundation to send instructions to your bank to debit your account and (B) your bank to debit your account in accordance with the instruction from the Irish Heart Foundation.

As part of your rights, you are entitled to a refund from your bank under the terms and conditions of your agreement with your bank. A refund must be claimed within 8 weeks starting from the date on which your account was debited. Your rights are explained in a statement that you can obtain from your bank.

Please complete all the fields below marked\*

\*Bank Name: \_\_\_\_\_

\*Address: \_\_\_\_\_

\*Account Number (IBAN): \_\_\_\_\_

\*Swift BIC: \_\_\_\_\_

Creditor Name: **IRISH HEART FOUNDATION**

Creditor Address: **50 RINGSEND ROAD, DUBLIN 4, IRELAND**

\*Type of Payment:  Recurrent (Monthly)  One-off Payment

\* Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ \*Date Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Please return completed form to the Irish Heart Foundation.

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My monthly instalment amount is:

€21\*  €18  €15  €10  Other € \_\_\_\_ per month

\*A regular gift of €21 per month could be worth an additional €9 from the Revenue Commissioners per month at no extra cost to you.

Your first contribution will be taken on either the 2nd or the 20th of the next available month. Please select which date you prefer.

2nd  20th

*You will be notified in writing ten days in advance of your first direct debit. If you wish to cancel within 7 days of a direct debit payment please contact your own bank.*

### Preferences

I would like to hear about other IHF events, activities, awareness campaigns and appeals.  Yes

Do you need a postal receipt:  Yes  No



**One third  
of strokes  
happen in people  
under 65 years  
of age.**



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Locall 1890 432 787

Monday to Friday 10am to 5pm

**Web:**

[www.irishheart.ie](http://www.irishheart.ie)

[www.stroke.ie](http://www.stroke.ie)



**Funding:**

The Irish Heart Foundation is the national charity fighting heart disease and stroke and relies on charitable donations for 90 per cent of its funding. We support, educate and train people to save lives, campaign for patients, promote positive health strategies, support research and provide vital public information. We need your support – through donations, as a volunteer or on our training courses.

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The information provided by the Irish Heart Foundation in this booklet was correct and accurate at the time of publication to the best of the charity's knowledge.

Registered Charity Number CHY 5507

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