



**DR SARAH BREWER** has a keen interest in nutrition and is the author of more than 35 books, including *The Daily Telegraph Encyclopedia of Vitamins, Minerals & Herbal Supplements* (Constable & Robinson, £9.99).

Strokes are more common in women than ever before – and you don't have to be collecting your pension to be at risk. Here's how to protect yourself...

# Strike out against strokes

**Y**ou may think strokes only happen to overweight, middle-aged businessmen or frail old people, but fall for this myth and you could be risking your health. Surprisingly, women in their late 40s and early 50s are twice as likely to have a stroke as men in this age group, according to a recent study by the American Academy of Neurology. In fact, almost three times as many women die from stroke as from breast cancer in the UK. But there is plenty you can do to reduce your risk.

## WHAT'S A STROKE?

A stroke is a sudden loss of control of one or more body parts or functions due to a sudden interruption of the blood supply to part of the brain. There are three main types: a thrombosis, where a clot forms in a brain artery (45 per cent of cases); an embolism, where a clot from elsewhere in the blood travels to the brain and lodges there (35 per cent); or a haemorrhage, where a ruptured blood vessel causes bleeding within or over the surface of the brain (20 per cent).

Symptoms and warning signs vary according to the part of the brain affected, but they usually come on quickly. They may include unconsciousness, confusion, loss of memory, loss of movement of part of the body like an arm, or several parts (usually on one side, for instance the left arm, left leg and left side of the face), numbness, speech difficulties or difficulty swallowing.

Some people also suffer what's known as a 'mini-stroke', where symptoms clear up within 24 hours. In medical speak this is called a transient ischaemic attack (TIA) and is thought to be down to a small blood clot in the brain, which temporarily stops blood reaching some brain cells. However, the clots break up and clear before brain cells die from lack of oxygen. A TIA is a serious warning sign that someone may suffer a full-blown stroke in the future, but this can be prevented with medical treatment.

## THE MAIN CULPRITS

The chief cause of stroke is high blood pressure – someone in their early 40s is 30 times more likely to have a stroke if they have uncontrolled high blood pressure than someone with normal blood pressure.

The other main cause is the hardening and furring of arteries. This is linked with high blood pressure and is more likely in people with poorly controlled diabetes, abnormally raised blood fats (including cholesterol and triglycerides) or raised blood levels of homocysteine, an amino acid that damages artery linings.

Other risk factors include smoking (which damages arteries and thickens the blood so it's more likely to clot), drinking too much alcohol (which makes blood pressure soar), and lack of exercise (which contributes to high blood pressure and furring of the arteries). The formation of small blood clots can also be triggered by an irregular heartbeat, damaged heart valves and the body producing too many blood cells.

## RECOVERY RATES

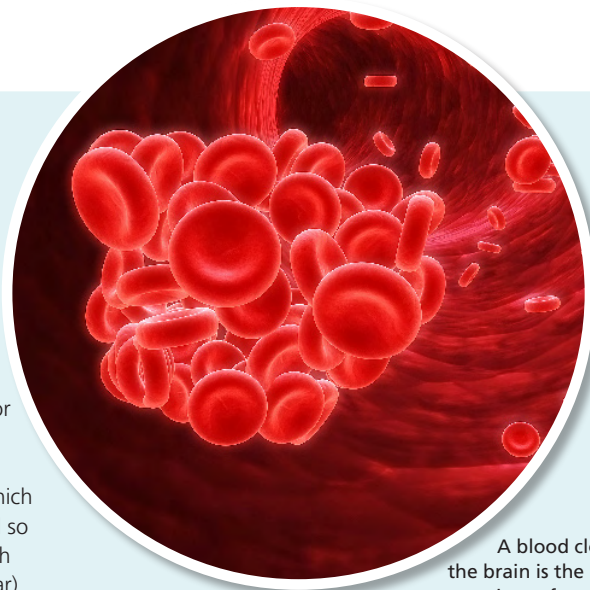
How well you recover from a stroke depends on its severity and what parts of the brain were affected. A full recovery and return to an active life is often possible, even if a stroke has affected the use of one side of your body. But it can take months or sometimes years for other parts of the brain to take over some of the tasks of the damaged brain cells.

Specific medical treatments include anticoagulant drugs, which prevent the blood from thickening, or a clot-busting drug to dissolve a clot. Physiotherapy, speech therapy and occupational therapy can help restore lost movement or speech.

## HOW TO BEAT IT

Researchers believe women are at increased risk of stroke largely due to rocketing rates of obesity and increasing waist size, which is particularly linked to high blood pressure, raised cholesterol, poor blood sugar control and heart disease. Women are also increasingly mimicking traditional male lifestyles – drinking more alcohol, suffering more stress and following a sedentary lifestyle – all of which push up your blood pressure. But you can start to reduce your risk of stroke today with these easy changes:

● **GO HIGH FIBRE** Eat plenty of wholegrains such as oats, wholemeal bread and brown rice or pasta, and fewer processed carbohydrates like white bread. High-fibre foods help combat cholesterol, plus they give you sustained energy so you're less likely to crave unhealthy fatty, sugary food.



A blood clot on the brain is the usual trigger for stroke

● **GET FIVE-A-DAY** Five daily portions of fruit and vegetables can reduce the risk of stroke by up to 30 per cent. This is because they contain antioxidant vitamins, plus potassium, calcium, magnesium, fibre and other substances that help to lower blood pressure and cholesterol levels. Researchers have found that eating an apple a day may help reduce the risk of heart disease and stroke by a third.

● **JUICE IT** Orange juice, grapefruit juice and pomegranate juice have been shown to help reduce your risk, but if you're on prescribed medication, check for interactions with grapefruit juice first.

● **FEAST ON FISH** Eating oily fish such as salmon, herring or mackerel once a week can help combat abnormal blood clotting.

● **STOP SMOKING** See your GP or call Quitline on 0800 002 200 for advice.

● **MEASURE YOUR WAIST** You may be at risk if your waist measures more than 32in for women or 37in for men.

● **GET MOVING** Just 30 minutes of brisk activity per day can lower blood pressure and cholesterol levels.

● **CUT DOWN ON SALT** Excess amounts of the white stuff send blood pressure soaring. The Food Standards Agency recommends eating no more than 6g a day. Always check the label, especially on processed foods – much of our intake is hidden.

● **GET CHECKED OUT** Ask your GP to check your blood pressure, glucose and cholesterol levels. If these are raised, ensure you follow medical advice to bring them down to the normal range. [healthy](#)

## STROKE-BUSTING SUPPLEMENTS

● **CALCIUM** helps lower blood pressure, but if you're taking a calcium channel blocker drug, the blood pressure-lowering effect of the supplement is lost so check with your GP first.

● **MAGNESIUM** also helps to lower blood pressure.

● **SELENIUM** – having a low level of this mineral increases the risk of a fatal stroke.

● **FOLIC ACID** can help lower raised levels of homocysteine.

● **GARLIC** helps lower blood pressure, cholesterol and other blood fats called triglycerides, as well as reducing blood stickiness and improving blood flow.

● **FISH OILS** help to reduce blood stickiness and triglycerides, lowering the risk of a heart attack or stroke.

● **COENZYME Q10** is an antioxidant that also helps lower blood pressure.

## Emergency action!

Dial 999 if you think someone has had a stroke. Symptoms include: numbness, weakness or paralysis (such as a drooping arm, leg, lower eyelid, a dribbling mouth or difficulty smiling), slurred speech, difficulty understanding speech,

sudden blurred vision, loss of sight, confusion, a severe headache or unconsciousness.

● *For more information about strokes, call the Stroke Association on 0845 303 3100 or visit its website at [www.stroke.org.uk](http://www.stroke.org.uk).*