The Link Between Diabetes and Stroke

by AFRA WILLMORE

Diabetes and Stroke: The Risk of Stroke in Diabetics

Being diagnosed with any type of diabetes can be scary, especially when your doctor outlines all the other health conditions you are now more prone to, which all seem to have a worst case scenario outcome of serious disability, or even death.

Take strokes for instance. Diabetes and stroke are closely connected – it's a known fact that people with diabetes are at higher risk of heart attacks and stroke – but why is this? let's start by looking at what a stroke actually is.

What is a Stroke?

During a stroke, blood vessels that supply your brain with oxygen become damaged or blocked, usually by a blood clot or a bleed in the brain from a ruptured artery. Blood carries essential nutrients and oxygen to your brain. Without blood your brain cells can be damaged or destroyed causing a loss of physical and/or cognitive ability.

There are two types of strokes:

- Hemorrhagic strokes, caused by a ruptured artery.
- Ischemic strokes result which from a blocked artery.

Most strokes are ischemic – they happen when a blood clot blocks the flow of blood to your brain. Blood clots usually form in areas where the arteries have become hardened, narrowed or "furred" up by fatty deposits. (This is called atherosclerosis for those of you who like the "proper" names for things.)

It's partly an age thing. As the candles on our birthday cakes increase in number, our arteries generally become harder and narrower. However, certain medical conditions, including diabetes, along with lifestyle factors can speed up this process and increase the risk of having a stroke.

What to Do in the Event of a Stroke

Thanks to global publicity campaigns most people now know at least some of the symptoms of stroke but if you, or someone close to you has diabetes it is important you are very familiar with the signs as early treatment is crucial for the best chance of a full recovery.

The main thing to remember is act FAST.

- **F**acial weakness. Can the person smile? Has their eye or mouth dropped?
- **A**rm weakness. Can the person raise both arms?

- **S**peech problems. Can the person speak clearly and understand what you say?
- **T**ime. To call an ambulance.

A friend of mine, upon feeling unwell, applied this little test to herself and realized she was having a mini stroke, known as a TIA (Transient Ischemic Attack). She was alone but had the presence of mind to make the supreme effort to get herself to her kitchen and take an aspirin – a simple treatment which can prevent more clots forming and is commonly used as an effective treatment in the event of an ischemic stroke.

The doctors told her afterwards that her presence of mind may well have limited the damage done and prevented a subsequent, more serious attack.

She has fully recovered and shows no sign of loss of movement or cognitive skills. Her case demonstrates that it is vital to know how to recognize the symptoms of a stroke, especially in the case of diabetics, who are 1.5 times more likely to suffer one.

Stroke Risk Factors

A diabetic's risk of stroke increases still further (according to the American Diabetes Association) if you are over 55, your family background is African, you've already had a stroke or TIA, or you have a family history of stroke or TIA.

Also at higher risk are diabetics with heart disease, high blood pressure or who are overweight. Have you got high LDL (bad) cholesterol or low HDL (good) cholesterol? Ask your doctor to check with a blood test if you aren't sure as this can put you at higher risk of stroke too. Being physical inactive and smoking also puts you in a higher risk bracket

Reducing Your Risk

Obviously there's nothing you can do about some of these risk factors – if Uncle Frank was African and had a stroke, well that's an unchangeable fact! But you can take steps to bring down your statistical likelihood of suffering a stroke significantly, by keeping your weight within healthy ranges.

There are lots of BMI checking tools online which will help you work out what this should be, taking your age, height and gender into account. My husband and I downloaded an app that tracked our weight loss and BMI on our smartphones. It even used to remind us when it was weigh-in time and we made it a little competition to see who could reach their personal healthy weight goal first.

There are lots of apps like this, or you could print off a BMI chart and stick it on your fridge door, marking your weight loss achievements as you lower your BMI number.

Additionally, if you smoke, quit – for so many reasons, and you don't need me to outline why. If you feel you lack willpower, talk to a healthcare professional as there are lots of schemes, tactics, and medications to help nowadays.

It's also helpful to lower your blood glucose levels, blood pressure and bad cholesterol stats with healthy eating, physical exercise and, if necessary, medication.

Don't skip diabetic review sessions or hospital/doctor/nurse appointments. You might be avoiding attending as you know you have lost control or are scared to face facts, but your diabetic specialists are the best people to help you get back on track and offer a kindly reminder that being a "good" diabetic is much better than the prospect of finding yourself in the stroke ward – or worse.