What is a stroke?

A stroke occurs when a clot or a torn blood vessel in the brain stops blood from reaching a part of the brain. Damage to that part of the brain from lack of blood and oxygen can cause various signs and symptoms of stroke, such as facial drooping, numbness, and paralysis.

Although anyone can have a stroke, your risk increases if you're male, over age 65, or have one of these conditions: high blood pressure, high cholesterol, heart disease, or diabetes. Being overweight, smoking, abusing drugs or alcohol, and taking birth control pills increase risk, too. African-Americans, people who are Hispanic or Asian, and those with a close relative who's had a stroke are also at higher risk.

How do I know if I'm having a stroke?

Signs and symptoms, which depend on the size and location of the brain injury, usually occur suddenly and may include:

\* numbness or weakness of the face, arm, or leg on one side of the body

\* confusion, trouble speaking or understanding

\* trouble seeing from one or both eyes

\* trouble walking, dizziness, or loss of balance or coordination

\* severe unexplained headache.

If you have any of these problems, call 911 immediately. Don't try to drive yourself to the hospital-your symptoms could worsen while you're driving.

If you have stroke symptoms that go away after a few seconds or minutes, you may have had a ministroke (also called a warning stroke). Contact your health care provider immediately for help because a bigger stroke may be on the way.

How is a stroke treated?

Your health care provider will ask you questions about your symptoms and when they started. He'll do some tests to determine whether the stroke is caused by a blood clot (the more common type of stroke) or by bleeding in the brain. These tests may include computed tomography (CT) and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scans of your head. He'll also test your blood for other problems and obtain an electroencephalogram (EEG), which records the brain's electrical activity and shows where the damage is located.

If the stroke is caused by a blood clot and you arrived at the hospital within 3 hours of when symptoms started, you may receive a drug to dissolve the clot, and another drug to thin your blood and prevent new clots. But these drugs won't be used if your stroke was caused by bleeding in your brain-that kind of stroke may require emergency surgery.

What happens after a stroke?

You may work with a physical therapist to regain muscle strength, balance, or the ability to walk. A speech therapist may evaluate how well you can eat, drink, and speak. If an arm or leg is paralyzed, an occupational therapist will help you learn how to dress yourself, bathe, and cook. Depending on how bad your stroke was, how quickly you recover, and how much help you have at home, you may be released from the hospital within 3 to 5 days. You may go to a rehabilitation center, a long-term care facility, or your home. The health care team can give you information or referrals for home care, support services, and support groups that deal with the issues facing patients and families after a stroke. You can also visit the American Stroke Association's Web site at [http://www.strokeassociation.org](http://www.strokeassociation.org/).

What can I do to prevent a stroke?

If your health care provider has prescribed medicine for high blood pressure, take it as directed. Lose weight if you're overweight, exercise regularly, and eat a well-balanced diet that's low in fat, cholesterol, sugar, and salt. If you smoke, stop, and don't drink alcohol excessively. If you have diabetes, keep your blood sugar under control.