

## Stroke risk factors for women to know

A longtime nurse and stroke coordinator at OSF HealthCare, Leslie Ingold has seen a problematic nationwide trend: a gap in stroke treatment for women compared to men.

It doesn't mean health systems aren't striving to provide the best care. Rather, Ingold says women – specifically those 80 and up – may be unaware of stroke risk factors that greatly impact them.

### Risk factors

Here are some risk factors for older women to consider:

- Hypertension, or high blood pressure. Ingold says for every 7.5-point increase above normal in the bottom number of your blood pressure reading, your stroke risk goes up 46%.

"Women are less likely to be well-controlled in their blood pressure," Ingold says.

- Ingold says women are at higher risk for atrial fibrillation (AFib, or an abnormal heartbeat).

"AFib-related strokes in women are usually more severe and more often deadly," Ingold says.

- Ingold says more men than women get diabetes, but it's a higher risk for stroke and stroke death for women.
- Ingold says women are more physically inactive than men.
- Depression and stress.

"Women have an increased prevalence of depression over men. It's associated with worse outcomes post-stroke," Ingold says. "And higher stress jobs for women mean a higher stroke risk. That's not seen in men."

- Abnormal cholesterol readings.
- Smoking.
- Ingold has seen plenty of women come to the emergency department with a migraine, which is three times more common in women and can mimic a stroke. And showing up for a migraine is fine. Ingold says to let a health care provider figure out what's wrong rather than guessing or staying home and hoping it goes away.

### Symptoms

One more thing to consider: stroke symptoms. The general acronym to remember is BEFAST. Look for abnormalities in balance, eyes, face, arms and speech. The T stands for time – as in, time to call 9-1-1.

But Ingold says strokes can present differently in women. Look for headaches, fatigue, disorientation, lightheadedness, nausea and hiccups. While extremely rare, persistent hiccups could be a sign of a posterior stroke, or a stroke in the back of the brain. Disruptions to neurotransmitter pathways in the central nervous system such as stroke, aneurysm, brain tumor, brain injury, seizure or infection may lead to hiccups.

### Prevention

When it comes to stroke prevention in women, Ingold says it starts with having a primary care provider. Don't rely on your OBGYN to do it all.

"Make an annual appointment with your primary. Know what your blood pressure is. Get annual lab work. Then discuss it all with your provider, and see if you need to make some lifestyle modifications," Ingold says.

Other tips that any provider will preach: eat healthy, exercise, ditch the cigarettes and seek care from a mental health provider for depression and stress. If you have migraines, talk to a provider about what medicine may work for you. You can also keep a headache diary to discover your migraine triggers.

**Learn more**

Read more about how to care for your body to prevent a stroke on the [OSF HealthCare website](#).