

The stress-stroke connection

It goes without saying: *mental* health issues can spawn *physical* health problems. But let's dig into one: how can being stressed all the time increase your risk for a stroke?

"Chronic stress, anxiety and depression can all lead to unhealthy factors," says Brittany Best, BSN, RN, a stroke navigator at OSF HealthCare. "They may not cause a stroke directly, but they will raise your blood pressure, inflammation and blood sugar levels. So they really can raise the risk of a stroke significantly."

Eating a healthy diet, avoiding alcohol and smoking, being active and mindfulness activities like meditation can help with this risk, Best says.

"Seeing your doctor regularly is one of the most important things you can do to reduce your stroke risk," Best adds. "They're going to keep an eye on things like blood pressure and lab work. They can get you on the right track to maintain overall health."

What if I'm on medication for my mental health? How does that play a role in stroke risk? Best says it shouldn't be a problem, but follow your health care provider's directions, and talk to them if you have symptoms.

A recap of stroke basics

If Best has a takeaway message, it's that 80% of strokes are preventable, and quick action when a stroke strikes can prevent serious brain damage or even death. When spotting stroke symptoms, remember the acronym BEFAST.

- B is for balance: Watch for sudden loss of balance.
- E is for eyes: Check for vision loss or eyes looking askew.
- F is for face: Look for droopiness or an uneven smile.
- A is for arm: Is one arm weak or numb?
- S is for speech: Watch for slurred, slow speech or no speech. Ask the person to repeat a simple sentence.
- T is for time. It's the conclusion to the checklist. [Time to call 9-1-1](#) if someone has these symptoms, even if they go away.

"Our main goal is getting patients in quickly. Identify their stroke symptoms. Get them to imaging. Get their care started as quickly as possible," Best says, outlining stroke care at the hospital she works at, [OSF HealthCare Saint Anthony's Health](#) Center in Alton, Illinois. "With strokes, time is very important. Up to two million brain cells can die every minute during a stroke. So it's very important for the treatment process to go smoothly."

The care team will also connect people with stroke resources, such as support groups like the one Best manages. Contrary to stereotypes, those support groups are not all doom and gloom.

"It's a nice place for stroke survivors and caregivers to connect with one another," Best says. "They can ask questions and listen to guest speakers. It really just provides a nice community for them to not feel alone in their recovery."

Learn more

Read more about treatment and prevention of stroke on the [OSF HealthCare Illinois Neurological Institute website](#).