

TWO TESTS TO PREVENT STROKE

Question: I am 60 years old and have a history of stroke in my family. Can I take any tests to prevent having a stroke?

Yes. There are two simple tests that are effective in looking out for those at high risk for stroke. In 2001, 164,000 Americans died of a stroke, up from 144,000 in 1990. It has now become the third largest cause of death after heart attack and cancer.

Each year, about 700,000 have a new or recurrent stroke. About 500,000 of these are new.

One-third to one-half of strokes are estimated to be caused by carotid-artery blockage. 88% of these are "ischemic", which means that the blood flow to the brain is blocked, usually by plaque or clots. 12% are "hemorrhagic", involving a burst aneurysm or artery in or near the brain.

There are two simple tests you should have. One is called a carotid ultrasound; the other is called the ankle-brachial test.

The carotid ultrasound spots fatty plaque build up in the carotid arteries that run along each side of your neck. These are important carriers of blood to your brain. They are slightly bigger than a pen in diameter and can be blocked by plaque or blood clots.

Roughly one-half of all stroke deaths could be prevented with the carotid ultrasound tests. Once plaque is found, it can be controlled with drugs and better diet. With more blockage, surgery or wire-mesh carotid stents are needed.

The ankle-brachial test is the second test. It compares blood pressures taken at the ankle and at the brachial artery in the upper arm. The ratio of blood pressures should be one to one. The normal ankle-brachial index (ABI) would be 1.0.

If the arteries between the arm and ankle are blocked, pressure at the ankle will be less than that in the arm. A score of 0.9 means blood-flow blockage is significant enough to be considered abnormal.

The test is a useful predictor of stroke and heart attacks as it directly measures "peripheral vascular disease". It gives a reading on plaque build-up throughout the body's arteries.

If a person gets an ABI score of 0.6 or less, this puts them at higher risk for stroke than from any other disease, including cancer.

Heart disease, stroke and peripheral-artery disease are all closely related. However, everyone focuses on heart disease and ignores peripheral artery disease.

One study screened almost 7,000 patients with the ankle-brachial test. These included people over 70 or those between 50-69 with a history of smoking or diabetes. The ABI revealed abnormal findings in 29% of the patients.

Speak to your family doctor concerning these tests. Often, the local hospitals offer some type of screening as well. Consult a vascular surgery/physician if you have abnormal findings in either test.

Lastly, natural means of preventing stroke include: do not smoke; exercise regularly; keep your blood pressure under control; avoid fatty foods; manage your stress; and drink alcohol in moderation.

Copyright © 2008 - Konicki Schumacher Chiropractic. All rights reserved.

Dr. Tom Konicki is a board certified chiropractic orthopedist and has practiced for 17 years in South Dayton. You can reach him at www.kschiro.com or mail your questions to Ask the Chiropractor, 2165 Miamisburg-Centerville Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459.