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The Health Column by Evelyn E. Ames **Stroke Risk Factors**

In the second of three articles about strokes, information is given about various risk factors associated with a person's susceptibility to having a stroke.

"Risk Factors" mean the traits and lifestyle habits that increase the risk of disease. Extensive clinical and statistical studies have identified several factors that increase the risk of stroke.

In general, the risk of stroke increases with older ages, but stroke can occur at any age, even to a fetus or young child. At each age, stroke is more common in men than women, and it is more common among African-Americans than white Americans. Individuals who have had one or more mini-stroke (Transient Ischemic Attack) are more likely to have a stroke than someone of same age and sex who hasn't.

Identified Stroke Risk Factors

- High blood pressure (140/90 mm Hg or higher) increases the risk of stroke four to six times.
- Heart disease, especially atrial fibrillation or AF, can double the risk.
- Tobacco use (cigarette smoking approximately doubles a person's risk for stroke).
Nicotine and carbon monoxide in tobacco smoke reduce the amount of oxygen in blood. They also damage the walls of blood vessels, making clots more likely to form. Nicotine, a stimulant, raises blood pressure.
- Diabetes causes destructive changes in the blood vessels throughout the body, including the brain.
- Sickle cell disease
- High cholesterol
- Heredity (family history) and race. Stroke risk is greater if a parent, grandparent, sister or brother has had a stroke. African Americans have a much higher risk of death from a stroke than Caucasians do.
- Gender. Stroke is more common in men than in women. In most age groups, more men than women will have a stroke in a given year. However, women account for more than half of all stroke deaths.

Women's vulnerability: Elderly, overweight women smokers who have high blood pressure or high cholesterol are more likely to have strokes. Other risk factors especially important for women under 55 include:

- Migraines: recent research shows that women who suffer from migraines with aura (visual disturbances such as flashing dots or blind spots) can be up to ten times more likely to suffer a stroke, depending on other risk factors.
- Birth Control Pills: women who take even a low-estrogen birth control pill may be twice as likely to have a stroke than those who don't and the risk may increase if other risk factors, such as smoking, are present. The association is in relation to blood clotting.
- Hormone Replacement Therapy may slightly increase stroke risk.
- Autoimmune diseases (e.g., diabetes or lupus) increase risk.
- Clotting disorders: women who've had more than one miscarriage may be at higher risk for blood clots, which can increase their chance of a stroke. Other signs of a possible clotting disorder can include previous history of clots in the legs (deep vein thrombosis); and a mottled purplish discoloration of the skin. *Excerpted from "What Women Need To Know About The Hidden Risk Factors For Stroke", Stroke Connection Magazine November/December 2004.*

African Americans: According to the American Stroke Association (division of the American Heart Association), they are among those least aware of stroke risk factors. High blood pressure in U.S. African Americans is highest in the world and 62.9 % of men and 77.2 % of women are overweight or obese.

Hispanics: Stroke is the fourth-leading cause of death among Hispanics. They have a higher rate of hemorrhagic strokes at a younger age than non-Hispanic whites. Prevalence of risk factors such as higher rates of diabetes, hypertension, and heavy alcohol use, less physical activity, less likely to have health insurance, higher rates of obesity, and less likely to have health insurance play a role as well as language barriers and lack of transportation.

In summation, stroke occurs in all age groups, in both sexes, and in all races in every country of the world. It can even occur before birth, when the fetus is still in the womb. Next time, we look at suggestions for controlling risk factors and encouraging treatments for stroke patients.

Helpful hint: posted on several web sites relating to strokes is this simple test when you suspect a loved one or friend is having a stroke. Ask the person to raise both arms above the head; ask the person to smile; ask the person to say a simple sentence. If the person can't do one or all three, off to the emergency you go! No matter what, if you suspect someone is having a stroke (refer to symptoms listed in first article), off you go to ER!