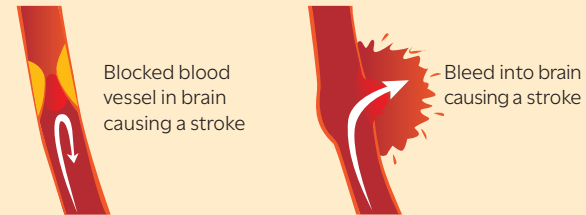


# Reduce your risk of stroke

stroke.org.nz

## What is a stroke?

A stroke is a sudden interruption of blood flow to part of the brain, causing it to stop working and eventually damaging brain cells. Most strokes happen when a clot blocks the flow of blood to the brain. A less common cause of stroke is when a blood vessel bursts and bleeds into the brain.



A stroke can be fatal or cause long-term disability. Depending on the part of the brain that is damaged, it can affect someone's ability to think, walk, talk, eat, see, read, and so many other things they were able to do before the stroke.

## Reduce your risk of stroke

These 10 points are explained in the next sections:

- Check your blood pressure regularly
- Be smokefree and vape-free
- Eat less salt and processed food
- Be active
- Check for atrial fibrillation
- Take medication as prescribed
- Keep your alcohol intake low
- Check and manage cholesterol levels
- Maintain a healthy weight
- Manage diabetes well



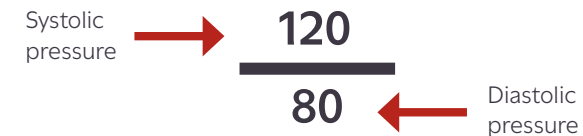
## Check your blood pressure regularly

High blood pressure is a leading risk factor for stroke. Over half of all strokes are linked to high blood pressure.

Blood pressure is a measurement of the force of blood on the blood vessel walls as it travels through the body. High blood pressure puts additional stress on the blood vessels throughout your body, especially the ones in your brain. This can damage blood vessels, which can lead to stroke.

Your blood pressure is expressed as two numbers, e.g. 120/80 and said as "120 over 80".

- ➔ The top number is your systolic pressure (e.g. 120). This is the pressure on your blood vessel walls as your heart pumps.
- ➔ The lower number is your diastolic pressure (e.g. 80). This is the pressure on your blood vessel walls as your heart rests between pumps.



Normal blood pressure is around 120/80 or lower. High blood pressure is when it is consistently over 140/90. High blood pressure often doesn't have any symptoms. The only way to know if you have high blood pressure is to get it checked. If you do have high blood pressure, it is important to follow your doctor's advice.

A healthy diet, regular exercise, not smoking, and keeping a healthy weight can help prevent or reduce high blood pressure.



## Be smokefree and vape-free

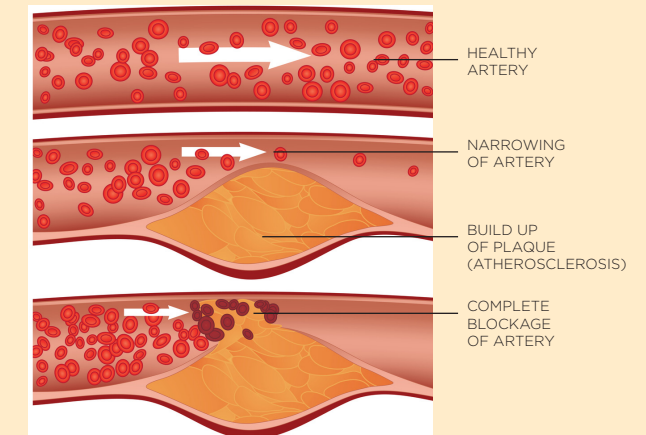
If you smoke 20 cigarettes a day, you are six times more likely to have a stroke than a non-smoker. Chemicals in cigarette smoke:

- Speed up the formation of plaque (fat, cholesterol and other substances) on blood vessel walls, resulting in atherosclerosis (narrowing of the arteries)
- Thicken the blood, making it sticky and more likely to clot
- Tighten the blood vessels which restricts blood flow and increases blood pressure



However, as soon as you stop smoking, your stroke risk begins to drop and continues to decline each day. For support to quit smoking, talk with your GP or **call Quitline: 0800 778 778.**

## Smoking speeds up the process of atherosclerosis







**Eat less salt and processed food**

A diet high in salt (sodium) can increase blood pressure and the risk of stroke. The more sodium in your blood, the more your blood volume increases, because sodium attracts and retains water. The heart has to work harder to move the increased volume of blood through the blood vessels. This creates increased strain on the arteries and high blood pressure.

It is recommended that adults have no more than one teaspoon of salt (2,000mg) a day from all food sources. Most of us eat far more salt than this each day. Around 75% of the salt we eat is hidden in our processed or takeaway foods.

You can reduce your salt intake by:

- choosing fresh rather than processed foods
- checking the label on packaged foods to help you choose lower-salt items. Lower-salt items contain less than 120mg of sodium per 100g of food
- cutting back on fast foods and takeaways
- using herbs, garlic, spices or pepper to flavour your food, instead of using salt

A healthy balanced diet includes lots of fresh fruit and vegetables, grains, and a moderate amount of lean meat or low-fat protein. It also includes low-fat dairy foods, soy or legume products, and limited fatty, salty, sugary foods and drinks.



**Be active**

Regular exercise will help to maintain a healthy blood pressure. Aim for 30 minutes of moderate exercise (enough to make you slightly warm and a little out of breath) on most days of the week. Any regular physical activity is good – and it can lower your stroke risk by 25%! If you need help being more active, ask your doctor about a Green Prescription.



**Check for atrial fibrillation**

Atrial fibrillation (AF) is a type of irregular heartbeat and is a risk factor for stroke. With AF, the blood can ‘pool’ in parts of the heart and form blood clots. A clot can travel through the blood vessels to the brain where it can block an artery and cause a stroke. Symptoms of AF can be palpitations, weakness or breathlessness, but some people have no symptoms. If you suspect you have AF, it is important to get checked by your doctor.



**Take medication as prescribed**

There are medications your doctor may prescribe you to manage your stroke risk. These depend on your stroke risk and may include medication to reduce your blood pressure, to prevent blood clots from forming, or to lower cholesterol. Even if you are feeling better, it is important to take these medications as prescribed or your stroke risk increases. If you have difficulties taking your medication or managing the side effects of medication, talk to your doctor.



**Keep your alcohol intake low**

Every year, excess alcohol consumption is linked to 1 million strokes globally. Drinking too much alcohol increases your stroke risk because it increases your risk of developing other conditions that are linked to stroke.



**Check and manage cholesterol levels**

High blood cholesterol can contribute to atherosclerosis which can lead to stroke. To reduce cholesterol, choose foods low in saturated fat. Check your cholesterol levels by having a blood test. Your doctor may prescribe medication to lower cholesterol, and it’s important to take these as prescribed, but a healthy diet and regular exercise are still important.



**Maintain a healthy weight**

Maintaining a healthy weight protects you against risk factors for stroke, like developing high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and type 2 diabetes. A good balance between healthy eating and regular exercise can help you maintain a healthy weight. If you find it hard to maintain a healthy weight, ask your doctor or nutritionist for help.



**Manage diabetes well**

Diabetes is a condition where the body is unable to utilise blood sugar. High blood sugar levels can speed up the development of atherosclerosis which can lead to stroke. If you have diabetes, your doctor can help you control your condition and reduce your risk of stroke.



➔ **Call 0800 78 76 53 or email [help@stroke.org.nz](mailto:help@stroke.org.nz) for free support and guidance.**

**About Stroke Aotearoa New Zealand**

Stroke Aotearoa New Zealand is the national charity dedicated to stroke prevention and improving outcomes for stroke survivors and their whānau. The generosity of individuals allows us to provide every aspect of our life-changing services. If you want to find out more about donating or fundraising to help protect the lives of people living in your community, please call **0800 45 99 54** or email **[fundraising@stroke.org.nz](mailto:fundraising@stroke.org.nz)**.

