

Ten Tips for Stroke Prevention

1. Reduce Saturated Fats

At room temperature saturated fats are usually solid. Saturated fats raise cholesterol in the body. Main sources are fatty meat, port, chicken skin, lard, butter, eggs, cheese, palm oils and whole milk products. Instead, try to choose lower saturated fat options like chicken, skimmed milk and skim mozzarella. Try not to eat more than 9-14 gms of saturated fats per day. Always read food labels to identify the saturated fat content.

2. Eliminate Trans Fats

These are modified unsaturated fats which are used for their ability to enhance the shelf life of food products. They are usually found in spreads (margarine, butter shortening), packaged foods e.g. cake mix, soup cups, fast food (fries, KFC), frozen foods e.g. pies, waffles, pizzas, breaded fish sticks. Look for fully or partially hydrogenated fats in the ingredient list.

3. Increase Good Fats

Good fats are monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats, which help reduce the risk of blood clotting and lowering blood pressure. Increase the use of monounsaturated fat sources e.g. olive oil, canola oil, avocados, olives, almonds and other nuts. Polyunsaturated fats are Omega-6 and Omega-3 which are also fats essential for our normal body and brain function. Omega-6 are found in sesame and sunflower seeds, and omega-3 in pumpkin and flaxseed, as well as in cold water fish like, salmon, tuna, mackerel, sardines etc.

4. Eat more Fruits and Vegetables

Fruits and vegetables contain a wide range of vitamins and minerals which are essential for our body's physiological functions. They are also rich in antioxidants which are important for minimising ongoing cell damage as well as fibre which is essential for digestive health.

5. Try Foods with Plant Stanols

Plant stanols are natural plant compounds which help to lower cholesterol in the body. Often they are added to foods for their beneficial effects e.g. Flora pro-activ, Benecol, yogurt drinks. We need around 2-3 gms/day to gain a significant health benefit.

6. Reduce Salt

The adult recommendation is a maximum of 6g/day (approx. 1 tsp) and most people in the UK consume far too much salt. Salt increases blood pressure and therefore the risk of strokes. Avoid foods high in salt e.g. anchovies, bacon, cheese, gravy granules, ham, pickles, salami, bread, pasta sauces, crisps, pizza, ready meals, soup, sausages, cereals.

7. Fill up with Fibre

Fibre is good for digestive health, prevents heart disease, diabetes and weight gain. The adult recommended is 14g (NHS), however to have a greater benefit eating up to 35 gm daily is recommended. There are 2 types; soluble and insoluble fibre, both with important gut functions. The main sources are plant based. E.g. oats, barley, banana, apples, bran, nuts and seeds. If you are having high amounts of fibre remember to drink at least 6-8 glasses of fluids a day to aid its digestion.

8. Stop Smoking

If you are a smoker, then strongly consider giving it up. There are many health benefits to stopping smoking including improvements in lung function in the long term, enhances the oxygen carrying capacity in the red blood cells, lowering blood pressure and the risk of blood clots. Tobacco smoke contains over 4,000 chemicals including tar, carbon monoxide, nicotine, ammonia, sulphuric acid, benzene and formaldehyde. Think of the money you could save if you gave up smoking.

9. Reduce Alcohol and stop the use of Recreational Drugs

High amounts of alcohol raise our blood pressure and damage our liver. Recommended guidelines for adult men is 3-4 units/ day (1.5 pints 4% beer) and for women is 2-3 units/day (1 glass of wine- 175mls). In moderate to small amounts alcohol can have beneficial effects. Recreational drugs are well known to increase the risk of blood clots, liver damage but also brain damage, anxiety, paranoia and depression.

10. Maintain a Healthy Weight

If you are overweight then consider losing some weight. Healthy eating is a large part of weight management. Alongside this if you are a diabetic good diabetic control and exercise are also important. Aim for around 30 min exercise e.g. brisk walking, jogging, cycling; 3-5 times a week. Losing 5-10% of your body weight can make a significant difference to lowering blood pressure and help control blood sugar levels.

Resources & References:

- NHS Choices. (2013) www.nhs.uk (accessed 5 April 2013)
- Mayo Clinic. (2012). Stroke. www.mayoclinic.com/health/stroke (accessed 5 April 2013)
- Holford P. (2005). The new optimum nutrition bible, 2nd edition. Berkeley, The Crossing Press.

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