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Obesity: Weighing Up the Risks of Stroke

Over 2 billion adults in the world are overweight and around 650 million of those are considered obese (1). Being obese not only increases your risk of high blood pressure, heart disease and diabetes, but also makes you more likely to have a stroke, particularly if you are carrying extra weight around your stomach (2). Fortunately, this is yet another risk factor that can be potentially altered through

a healthy diet, exercise and other lifestyle changes.

How do I know if I'm overweight or obese?

You probably already know if you're carrying extra weight, but it's worth checking your Body Mass Index (BMI) to find out exactly where you sit on the scale. The World Health Organization defines being overweight or obese as: abnormal or excessive fat accumulation that may impair health. (3). You can easily find out if you are heavier than you should be for your height by working out your BMI.

What your BMI says about you
BMI is calculated by dividing your weight in kilograms by the square of your height in metres. This result helps to determine the difference between being a little overweight or being morbidly obese.
Overweight
BMI: 25 to 29.9
Obese
BMI: Over 30
Morbidly obese
BMI: Over 40 (4)

How is obesity linked to stroke?

The relationship between abdominal obesity and stroke is long established, particularly where other conditions are also present, such as diabetes, high blood pressure and high cholesterol. But there are different opinions as to why the risk is increased in overweight people.

Some studies suggest BMI alone is not a good indicator for stroke risk. Instead, researchers claim excess stomach weight may be a stronger predictor (2). A waist measurement of over 40 inches in men and over 35 inches in women carries

around four times higher risk of developing a stroke compared to people with average belly sizes (4).

Why is waist-to-hip ratio (WHR) important?

Your waist-to-hip ratio (WHR) essentially tells you if you are carrying excess weight around your stomach – and this directly relates to your stroke risk. Start by measuring your waist and the widest part of your hips; then divide the waist measurement by the hip measurement. Abdominal obesity is defined by the World Health Organization as a waist-to-hip ratio above 0.90 for men; and over 0.85 for women. For every 0.01 increase in WHR, your stroke risk increases (5).

How can I reduce my risk of stroke?

Obesity is linked to stroke, regardless of age or other cardiovascular risk factors. Therefore, it makes sense that reducing your weight will reduce your chance of having a stroke.

There are several ways you can reduce body fat, including introducing more exercise, lowering your salt intake, cutting down on alcohol and eating a healthy diet that's low in saturated fat, and high in fruit and vegetables (6).

References

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