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YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT: Diet and Stroke Risk

A good diet, which features plenty of fruits and vegetables; fibre; whole grains; legumes; and fish has been associated with a reduced risk of stroke (1). But what's the best way to maintain a healthy weight and keep your chances of developing cardiovascular health problems to a minimum?

How diet and nutrition is linked to stroke

What we eat affects the management of weight, blood pressure and diabetes, which are all directly linked to the risk of stroke (1). People who are overweight or obese are more than two times more likely to suffer a stroke, compared to those of a normal weight (2). While high blood pressure and diabetes can weaken the blood vessels leading to the brain, causing them to rupture or block more easily. Aside from the obvious health benefits, it's clear to see that eating a balanced, nutritious diet could also reduce your risk of heart disease and stroke.

What is a 'good' diet to reduce stroke risk?

A Mediterranean style diet, high in plant-based food, olive oil and a moderate amount of meat, dairy and wine, is consistently associated with reduced risks of stroke. The idea comes from looking at the dietary patterns that formed in the olive-growing regions of the Mediterranean in the early 1950s and 60s and has long been linked to better cardiovascular health (3).

In essence, The Mediterranean Diet involves regular consumption of:

- Fruits and vegetables – five or more servings per day
- Oily fish, such as mackerel – at least two portions per week
- Olive oil – high intake
- Tree nuts and peanuts – three or more servings per week
- Legumes, such as beans or lentils – three or more servings per week

What is a 'bad' diet according to stroke risk?

In addition to being aware of what foods are good for you, people at risk of stroke also need to know what to avoid. The general advice today, suggests limiting the intake of meat, in particular red and processed meats; reducing the number of sweet drinks and alcohol; and cutting down on trans-fats found in baked goods (4).

To reduce stroke risk, you should try to consume less:

- Red and processed meat – high in saturated fat and sodium
- Wine – high levels are associated with high risk
- Sweetened drinks and foods – consuming two or more servings of sweet drinks could increase the risk of ischemic stroke (5)
- Added fats – avoid trans-fats, found in cakes and pastries
- Dairy – try to switch to low-fat varieties

As you can see, poor diet is one of ten key risk factors for stroke that can be easily changed. Combining healthy eating with plenty of exercise helps to reduce your body weight, trim your waistline, and lowers your chances of cardiovascular health problems.

References

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