



Heart healthy diet helps avoid strokes

Question: Can you define what is meant by a healthy diet with respect to silent strokes? -- John Dotten, Honolulu.

Answer: "We all have to die sometime" is a common refrain used to justify favorite vices. But if a stroke is the consequence of indiscretion, it can take away freedom long before death takes away life.

A recent report estimates that over 11 million Americans will unknowingly have silent strokes this year. This is 20 times as often as symptomatic strokes occur. Most people having these strokes won't know that they are in danger.

A stroke occurs due to disrupted blood flow to a part of the brain. Tiny blood vessels can become blocked or ruptured and prevent an adequate flow of oxygen-rich blood to brain cells. If the disruption of blood flow is significant enough, the mental or physical function controlled by that part of the brain is impaired.

Frequently, there are warning signs prior to full strokes such as unexpected weakness, difficulty in talking, dizziness or double vision. These transient ischemic attacks can last only a

few minutes or less.

Now there is significant evidence that even without TIA or stroke symptoms, silent strokes can insidiously cause accumulating damage to the brain. The end result may be a decrease in the ability to think clearly, to remember things or to maintain normal motor skills like walking. Because the damage is cumulative, it can lead to various levels of dementia.

The same basic recommendations for promotion of heart health will prevent both typical and silent strokes. These include not smoking, eating a healthy diet and maintaining a physically active lifestyle.

The stop smoking recommendation is easy to understand but very difficult for some to achieve. Over time, smoking can damage blood vessels and increase stroke risk.

There are over 100 recent scientific articles reporting relationships between diet and brain health. Although there are a few dietary factors to consider, one message is clear. Eat plenty of vegetables and fruits. Researchers think that vegetables and fruits contain components that reduce oxidative damage to

blood vessels.

Other research indicates:

1) Eating fish a few times a week is associated with better brain health. Although researchers propose that this is related to omega-3 fatty acids in fish, they also report that brain health seems unrelated to taking fish oil supplements.

2) Individuals who have blood pressure that is either too high or too low are at greater risk of stroke.

3) Those with low blood protein levels have an increased risk of stroke. This is particularly important for those who have excessively limited protein in their diet. People who don't eat many calories often have too little protein in their diets. This is common in older people with low calorie needs.

4) High fat meals can cause blood vessels to narrow, red blood cells to clump together, and blood flow to slow, making it more difficult for blood to get to all parts of the brain and increasing the risk of stroke.

5) Regular physical activity helps to normalize blood pressure and maintain a healthy blood lipid profile.

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