

## Do your part to lower stroke risk

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On average, someone in the U.S. has a stroke every 40 seconds, and someone dies from a stroke every 3 minutes and 33 seconds. There are, however, ways you can minimize your risk that will improve your overall health at the same time.

First, avoid smoking and excessive drinking. Everyone knows cigarette smoking is bad for your lungs, but it is also a huge factor in increasing your chances of having a stroke. So stop smoking to lower your risk. Your primary care physician can advise you about programs that will help you quit. Smoking is also bad for your lungs, so quitting is a win-win option.

Drinking too much alcohol can raise your blood pressure. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that men should have no more than two drinks per day, and women only one. Excessive drinking can also cause you to put on weight, which is another risk factor for having a stroke.

A healthy diet is a must. Eat foods low in saturated fats, trans fat, and high in fiber to help avoid high cholesterol. Limiting salt can help lower your blood pressure. High cholesterol levels and high blood pressure increase your chance of having a stroke.

Stay as active as possible. Physical activity can help lower your weight, cholesterol level and blood pressure.

You should also recognize the signs of a stroke by remembering the acronym B.E.F.A.S.T.

- ◆ Balance — Is the person experiencing sudden loss of balance or coordination?
- ◆ Eyes — Is the person having a sudden change in vision or trouble seeing?
- ◆ Face Drooping — Does one side of the face droop or is it numb? Ask the person to smile. Is the person's smile uneven or lopsided?
- ◆ Arm Weakness — Is one arm weak or numb? Ask the person to raise both arms. Does one arm drift downward?
- ◆ Speech — Is speech slurred? Is the person unable to speak or hard to understand? Ask the person to repeat a simple sentence.
- ◆ Time to Call 9-1-1 — If the person shows any of these symptoms, even if the symptoms go away, call 9-1-1 and get them to the hospital immediately.

If you do have a stroke, Polk Medical Center is ready to respond. Polk has been recognized as an Acute Stroke Ready Hospital by The Joint Commission and the American Heart Association. That means we have the expertise to make sure you get the care you need.

As we approach the anniversary of the first COVID positive patient in northwest Georgia, it's hard not to reflect on the toll the pandemic has taken over the past year. And we aren't just talking about the physical burden placed on those who had the virus, but also the mental and emotional strain it's placed on everyone.

The steps we've taken to reduce spread of the virus, such as social distancing and masking up, have been necessary, but have also resulted in many of us feeling isolated, lonely and anxious.

The increased stress that comes along with these emotions can also negatively impact our physical health. Research connects elevated stress levels to higher blood pressure and an increased risk of heart disease.

By learning to cope with these feelings in a healthy way, we can build resiliency that can help guard against potentially negative consequences.

These practical steps can help:

Recognize the Signs of Stress

Be aware of these negative signs of stress:

- ◆ Difficulty sleeping or nightmares
- ◆ Changes in appetite or energy
- ◆ Feelings of fear, sadness and loneliness ◆ Difficulty concentrating
- ◆ Becoming easily angered
- ◆ Increased use of alcohol or other mind- or mood-altering substances

Take Care of Your Body

Exercise really does help alleviate stress, and it doesn't have to be expensive, painful or difficult. Just 30 minutes per day of walking can help boost your mood and reduce stress.

Healthy, well-balanced meals and a good night's sleep will also do wonders.

Try a Relaxing Activity

Don't feel guilty about taking the time to relax. Prayer, meditation, yoga or other gentle exercises are all great ways to reduce stress.

Unplug When You Can

Take breaks from social media and watching or reading news stories. There's nothing wrong with wanting to stay informed, but constantly hearing about the pandemic or other stressful news of the day can be upsetting.

Try limiting the time you spend watching news programming to only what's necessary. As a matter of fact, it's good to limit daily screen time in general. You might try to replace that activity by reading a book, playing a game, putting together a puzzle or enjoying a good conversation

with family or friends.

Stay Connected

Positive relationships can be critical to a healthy state of mind. We may have to find innovative ways to do it, but building connections with people who can offer emotional support can be vital.

Don't hesitate to ask for help from friends and family. That works both ways too. Chances are they're feeling as emotionally taxed as you are. For socially distanced friends, apps like FaceTime, Skype and Zoom are alternatives that let you see each other "face-to-face."

Religious and community organizations are also great places to find support. Even if those groups aren't yet meeting in person, most are offering some type of virtual connection point.

Talk to Your Doctor or Healthcare Provider

Most important, if any of these symptoms persist, get help. Call your healthcare provider if stress is continually getting in the way of your daily activities.

If you don't already have a provider, Floyd has offices in Cedartown, Rockmart, Taylorsville and across our area. Others do as well. Floyd Behavioral Health is also available to provide a free confidential screening. They can be reached at 706509-3500. The critical thing is for you to get help if you need it.

As you consider your own wellness, remember that being emotionally healthy does not mean you are happy all the time. It just means you are aware of your emotions and can deal with them. Emotionally healthy people aren't immune to stress, anger, and sadness, but they are better equipped to manage them and aren't afraid to ask for help when necessary.

The stress and anxiety we've experienced during the pandemic is real and we've probably all hit a low spot at some point over the last year. I know I have. But remember, we're in this together and we're here to help if you need it.

Finally, if you or someone you love is in crisis and need immediate help, there are resources available around the clock. These include:

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline – 1-800-273-TALK (8255)

National Domestic Violence Hotline – 1-800-799-7233 or text LOVEIS to 22522

National Child Abuse – 1-800-4ACHILD (1-800-422-4453, call or text)

National Sexual Assault Hotline – 1-800-656-HOPE (4673)

Veteran's Crisis Line – 1-800-273TALK (8255)

Don't hesitate to reach out.