

AS SEEN IN

GOOD HOUSEKEEPING

woman's day

**Q.** Does being a woman put you at a higher risk for stroke?

**A.** Yes. Women are hormonally different and live longer than men, which puts women at higher risk of stroke.



With May being **National Stroke Awareness Month**, we asked two New Jersey stroke specialists to discuss how being female may put you at higher risk for stroke.

**Do the symptoms of stroke differ for men and women?**

"Women may experience many of the same symptoms as men, like sudden weakness or numbness on one side of the face, arm, or leg, drooping of the face, speech problems, vision changes, difficulty walking or keeping balance, or excruciating headache, but they also are more likely to have other atypical symptoms," shares Spozhmy Panezai, M.D., stroke director at JFK University Medical Center and associate professor at Hackensack Meridian School of Medicine.

Women are more likely than men to present with unique stroke symptoms including generalized weakness, fainting, difficulty breathing or shortness of breath, agitation, hallucinations, hiccups, or nausea and vomiting, she adds.

**What is the impact of stroke on women as compared to men?**

"Stroke is the third leading cause of death for women and kills twice as many women as breast cancer," says Shobhana R. Joseph, APN, lead stroke APN at the Neuroscience Institute at Hackensack University Medical Center.

In fact, about 50,000 more women die of stroke each year compared to men. While women typically live longer than men, advancing age increases their stroke risk.

**What are some risk factors for women?**

"Women can have strokes because of the same reasons as men, such as high blood pressure, smoking, and diabetes. But in addition to that, women's risk increases because of hormonal changes, pregnancy, and childbirth," mentions Dr. Panezai. "A woman's hormonal cycle and use of hormonal birth control are risk factors for stroke. The hormonal changes and other health issues that can occur during pregnancy, such as high blood pressure or preeclampsia, and postmenopause can increase the risk for stroke."

Younger women are also more prone to migraine headaches, which can be a risk factor for stroke. Older women, on the other hand, are frequently diagnosed with atrial fibrillation (AFib), a heart rhythm disturbance, which is a major risk factor for stroke.

**Are there any differences in the recovery process for women?**

"When it comes to taking medications on time, and following the instructions of physicians, women tend to be more compliant," says Dr. Panezai. "However, women unfortunately have a much higher risk of mental health or mood disorders which greatly impacts their quality of life after stroke." Women are twice as likely to suffer from depression after a stroke compared to men, with about a 10% likelihood for men and 20% for women.

"The depression may not be caused by psychological reasoning, but actual physical changes. The brain is damaged during a stroke, and the chemical changes from the injury can lead to an imbalance, which leads to depression," adds Ms. Joseph.

Sometimes the patient is unable to recognize that they are depressed, so educating the families and loved ones is so important. Support groups are also a great resource for women to tap into and help them recover.

**What can women do to prevent stroke?**

"Women should work closely with their doctors to identify and address any medical risk factors they may have. Common stroke risk factors include high blood pressure, high cholesterol, smoking, diabetes, being overweight and physically inactive, carotid artery disease, using birth control pills or hormone replacement therapy, and atrial fibrillation," advises Ms. Joseph.

Modifications in your lifestyle should also be addressed, shares Dr. Panezai. This may include changing your dietary habits, engaging in regular physical activity, quitting smoking, and reducing or eliminating alcohol consumption.



**Spozhmy Panezai, M.D.**, stroke director at JFK University Medical Center and associate professor at Hackensack Meridian School of Medicine



**Shobhana R. Joseph, APN**, lead stroke APN at the Neuroscience Institute at Hackensack University Medical Center



To learn more about your risk for stroke or to make an appointment with one of our specialists, visit [HackensackMeridianHealth.org/Stroke](https://www.hackensackmeridianhealth.org/Stroke).

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