

# WOMEN AND STROKE: MAKE PREVENTION A PRIORITY

Whether it's caring for their own families, assisting aging parents, or managing their careers, today's women have a lot on their plates. And with all the everyday hustle and bustle, many women inadvertently put their health on the back burner.



In honor of National Stroke Awareness Month in May, Spozhmy Panezai, M.D., Director of the Comprehensive Stroke Center at Hackensack

Meridian Neuroscience Institute at JFK University Medical Center and Associate Professor at Hackensack Meridian School of Medicine, wants to educate women about stroke risk factors and encourage them to make stroke prevention a priority.

"Stroke kills more women than men each year and is the #3 cause of death in women, with twice as many deaths occurring from stroke as breast cancer," said Dr. Panezai. "Although 1 in 5 women will have a stroke in their lifetime, there are things women can do to reduce their stroke risk – and it all starts with awareness."

## What increases stroke risk in women?

Having medical problems such as high blood pressure, diabetes, high cholesterol, being overweight, blood clotting disorders, and having heart conditions including atrial fibrillation are typically the risk factors that contribute most to stroke risk. Black women are also at increased risk of stroke and cardiovascular disease compared to women of other races due to greater incidence of these risk factors. Lifestyle habits including smoking, excessive alcohol consumption, drug use, poor dietary choices, and being sedentary increase the risk of stroke as well.



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In addition to these factors, Dr. Panezai notes that any condition that causes hormonal changes in the body can also increase stroke risk for women – including pregnancy, taking birth control pills, using hormone replacement therapy or simply going through menopause.

But there's another stealthy culprit that is especially prevalent – and often overlooked – among women: stress.

"We know that stress increases inflammation in the body, and inflammation increases the risk of blood clot development," said Dr. Panezai.

## How can women manage stroke risk?

The best strategy, according to Dr. Panezai, is working closely with

a doctor to identify and manage stroke risk factors.

"For some women, 'management' might mean making lifestyle changes – such as maintaining a healthy weight, increasing physical activity, cutting back on alcohol, eating fewer processed foods, quitting smoking and controlling stress," said Dr. Panezai. "Other women might need to start or stop certain medications or undergo treatment for a related condition, such as AFib, high blood pressure or sleep apnea."

Talking about family history with a physician can also help identify things like genetic clotting disorders or a predisposition for diabetes or cardiovascular problems.

"You are not necessarily a victim of your genes, and a family history of stroke can sometimes be outdone," said Dr. Panezai. "But if you suddenly develop a new medical condition, don't just brush it off. It could be a sign that something is wrong, and you need to make your physician aware."

With so much resting on women's shoulders, stroke prevention truly is the best medicine.

"Women have so many unique roles and are so important to those around them – they shouldn't wait until something happens to start taking care of themselves," said Dr. Panezai.

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



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