Promoting a healthy lifestyle - reducing the risk of stroke

Lifestyle factors
Most people have at least one lifestyle factor that increases their risk of heart disease or stroke.

Smoking
Smoking increases your risk of heart disease and stroke, as well as the risk of other diseases such as cancer. Smoking increases risk by making the blood stickier and therefore more likely to clot.

The toxins in cigars and cigarettes affect the muscles in blood vessels, which leads to loss of elasticity and high blood pressure. Smoking also deprives the body’s cells of oxygen, which means muscles need to work harder and healing is delayed.

For free advice and support to stop smoking, there are two Stop Smoking Services available across Derbyshire:

NHS Derby City Stop Smoking Service (Fresh Start) Freephone: 0800 707 6870 www.freshstart.nhs.uk
Derbyshire County Stop Smoking Service Freephone: 0800 085 2299 www.derbyshirestopsmokingservice.nhs.uk

Alcohol
Research has shown that alcohol taken in moderation can reduce the risk of heart disease and stroke. The benefits are mainly seen in men over 40 years and post-menopausal women.

Excessive alcohol taken regularly or ‘binge-drinking’ increases the risk of stroke by increasing the stickiness of the blood and raising blood pressure.

It is recommended that men have up to 21 units per week. Women should drink no more than 14 units a week. It is advisable to have 1 or 2 alcohol free days each week (see reading list).

Diet
It is generally considered that a diet which is low in saturated fat (found in red meat and dairy products), low in sugar and high in fibre helps to reduce the risk of a stroke.

It is also advisable to reduce salt intake, as this can contribute to a raise in blood pressure.

It is recommended that 5 portions of fruit and vegetables are eaten daily, to provide essential vitamins and fibre. This is thought to play a role in reducing the harmful low-density cholesterol that leads to a stroke.

It has been shown that eating 1 - 2 portions of oily fish weekly could reduce the risk of stroke by reducing the clotting ability of the blood, and lowering a type of cholesterol called ‘triglyceride’.

It is advisable to avoid multi-vitamins containing vitamins A and D if oily fish is included regularly in the diet, as these vitamins can build up in the body.
Obesity

Being overweight is thought to be linked to heart disease and stroke, because it is usually associated with poor diet and lack of exercise.

These in turn can lead to high blood pressure, diabetes and high cholesterol.

Activity/exercise

Being physically active and taking regular exercise is thought to reduce the risk of a stroke by lowering blood pressure, modifying blood cholesterol, and regulating appetite.

Exercise is associated with the release of a ‘feel-good’ hormone (endorphins) that helps to lift mood.

It is recommended that we need to exercise for at least 30 minutes, 5 times a week to remain healthy. This should be built up gradually in time and intensity. The 30 minutes can be split into 10 - 15 minute episodes during the day.

Further reading

These topics are covered in other leaflets in this series:

‘Medication for the Secondary Prevention of Stroke’

‘Common Investigations Following a Stroke/Transient Ischaemic Attack (TIA)’

‘How to Reduce the Risk of Stroke’

‘Just Eat More – Five-a-day’ Department of Health www.dh.gov.uk

‘Reducing your Blood Cholesterol’ British Heart Foundation www.bhf.org.uk

‘Get Active’ British Heart Foundation www.bhf.org.uk

‘Think about Drink’ Department of Health www.dh.gov.uk