Reducing salt; preventing stroke

What is a stroke?
A stroke occurs when part of the blood supply to the brain is cut off, reducing the amount of oxygen that can get to the brain.

The effect of stroke can therefore be very sudden and serious. There are two main types of stroke; 1) a blockage in a blood vessel, called an ischemic stroke; 2) a bleed due to blood vessels bursting, called a haemorrhagic stroke.

What causes a stroke?
High blood pressure (hypertension) is the single biggest cause of stroke, responsible for about half of ischemic strokes. A high salt diet increases your blood pressure and will therefore increase your risk of stroke.

How common is stroke?
You are not alone if you have had a stroke. Stroke is the third most common cause of death in the UK, with an estimated 150,000 strokes and mini strokes every year; about a third of which are fatal.

Simple lifestyle changes such as reducing the amount of salt in your diet can help to reduce blood pressure and therefore lower your risk of stroke.

Who is at risk of stroke?
Anyone can have a stroke; however there are a number of factors which can increase your risk.

- If you are male
- Over 55 years of age
- Have a family history of stroke
- Are of Asian or African descent
- Have high blood pressure

Also, if you have a diet which is high in salt or fat, low in fruit and vegetables or if you smoke or are overweight, then your risk of having a stroke is higher.

Preventing a stroke

Good news! You can still reduce your risk of having a stroke or second stroke by making simple lifestyle changes, such as:

- Improve your diet, e.g. by eating less salt
- Lose weight
- Do more exercise
- Quit smoking

Reduce your intake of high salt foods, particularly processed foods which contain a lot of hidden salt.
Our average salt intake is 8.6g per day; much higher than the recommended maximum of 6g per day – about a teaspoon!

Eating more fruit and vegetables will increase your intake of potassium – this is helps to counteract the effect that salt has on increasing blood pressure.

Top tips

- Sodium is only a part of salt. If you find sodium on a label you will need to multiply the figure by 2.5 to get salt
- Most of the salt you eat (75%) is hidden in processed foods. Check labels of products such as bread, cereal, soup, sauces and meat products and choose lower salt options
- Don’t add salt when cooking or at the table; foods may taste bland at first it will only take a couple of weeks for you to adjust – sea and rock salts are just as bad for you!
- Adults should be active for 30 minutes five times a week; try getting off the bus or train stop earlier and walking into work
- Have regular blood pressure checks to monitor your progress

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