

Understanding Stroke (CVA)

What is a CVA?

A cerebrovascular accident (CVA), also called a stroke, happens when blood flow to part of the brain is blocked or stops. Blood carries oxygen to the brain, and without it, brain cells can become damaged or die.

Blood travels from the heart to the brain through blood vessels called arteries. When blood flow is interrupted, the affected part of the brain cannot work properly.

Different areas of the brain control different body functions, including:

- Movement and coordination
- Feeling and sensation
- Balance
- Memory and thinking
- Alertness and attention
- Vision and hearing
- Speech and swallowing
- Bladder and bowel control

Because of this, a stroke can affect many parts of the body depending on where it occurs in the brain.

Types of Strokes

Ischemic Stroke

An ischemic stroke is the most common type of stroke. It happens when a blood vessel in the brain becomes blocked, usually by a blood clot. This blockage prevents blood and oxygen from reaching part of the brain, which can cause brain cells to become damaged and die.

Blood clots can form in two main ways:

- Thrombus: A blood clot that forms in a brain blood vessel, usually where fatty plaque has narrowed the artery.

- Embolus: A blood clot that forms elsewhere in the body, often the heart, and travels to the brain, where it blocks blood flow.

Risk factors that increase the chance of clot formation include high blood pressure, diabetes, high cholesterol, smoking, atrial fibrillation, heart disease or prior heart attack, heart valve problems, carotid artery disease, obesity, and physical inactivity.

Transient Ischemic Attack (TIA)

A transient ischemic attack (TIA) is sometimes called a “mini-stroke.” It happens when blood flow to the brain is briefly blocked, but symptoms go away within a short period of time.

Even though symptoms resolve, a TIA is an important warning sign that a larger stroke may occur in the future and should be taken seriously.

Hemorrhagic Stroke

A hemorrhagic stroke happens when a blood vessel in the brain bursts, causing bleeding in or around the brain. This bleeding reduces blood flow and oxygen to brain tissue and can damage or kill brain cells.

- Accounts for about 10–13% of all strokes
- Oxygen is reduced because both the bleeding and pressure affect brain tissue
- Treatment focuses on controlling the bleeding and reducing pressure in the brain

Risk factors for hemorrhagic stroke include:

- High blood pressure (most common risk factor)
- Aneurysms, which are weak or bulging areas in blood vessel walls
- Arteriovenous malformations (AVMs), which are abnormal connections between arteries and veins

Recovery and Support

A stroke can affect each person differently depending on which part of the brain is involved and how quickly treatment is received. Recovery is a gradual process and often requires time, rehabilitation, and ongoing support.

Understanding what a stroke is and how it happens is an important step in recovery and in reducing the risk of future stroke. Your healthcare team is here to support you, answer questions, and guide you and your family throughout this process. Please reach out to your healthcare providers with questions, concerns, or for further education.