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Stroke can be prevented!

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Almost everyone reading this column knows someone who's had a stroke. Stroke is the third leading killer in both Ohio and the United States. Around 7000 people die of stroke in Ohio each year. Stroke is also largely avoidable. The purpose of this article is to teach you what a stroke is, what you can do to prevent it, what the symptoms are, and that you need to call 911 when you have any of the symptoms.

Stroke happens when a part of your brain is starved of oxygen because a blood vessel is blocked by a thrombus (blood clot, see illustration), or ruptures. Some common symptoms of stroke include: **numbness** (changed sensation) **or weakness** of the face, arm, or leg, especially on one side of the body; **trouble seeing** in one or both eyes, **trouble walking** because of weakness or being off balance, **severe headache** without a known cause, **slurred speech** or not understanding what is said to you, or **confusion** that comes on suddenly. If you have any of these symptoms, you must call 911 immediately. This is because there is now a treatment that may help your stroke. The medication is called tPa ("tissue Plasminogen activator"), and it dissolves blood clots. It can only be given in the first three hours after the stroke begins. Unfortunately, too many people wait for too long to go to the emergency room, or don't even go. With the medication, the stroke can be kept from worsening.

So what can you do to avoid a stroke in the first place? Risk factors for stroke include age, being African-American, and male. Unfortunately you can't do anything about those. However, there are some things that you CAN change. People who have high blood pressure, diabetes ("sugar"), high cholesterol, heart disease, or who smoke any tobacco product are all at very high risk for stroke, as much as three times the risk of someone who has none of those things. All those conditions, including smoking, can be medically treated. By treating these, you can reduce your risk of stroke quickly. (Illustration courtesy of NINDS)

