

What is Pregnancy-Related Stroke?

Strokes are life-threatening emergencies that happen when blood flow to the brain is suddenly interrupted. They require immediate medical attention because they can cause permanent brain damage, disability or death.

Pregnancy increases the risk of stroke, which may occur at any time, including the postpartum period (the weeks and months after delivery, up to one year). Although rare, the rate of pregnancy-related stroke is rising. Stroke is the most common cause of serious long-term disability after pregnancy.

There are ways to potentially prevent stroke. Get regular medical care before, during and after pregnancy to address risk factors. Learn the warning signs. Encourage friends and family members to call 911 quickly if a stroke is suspected because you may be unable to take action alone.



Why does pregnancy increase the risk of stroke?

Pregnancy puts stress on the heart and blood vessels. Most women have healthy pregnancies but some problems that increase stroke risk during and after pregnancy include:

- Blood clotting
- High blood pressure
- Preeclampsia (severe high blood pressure)
- Gestational diabetes
- Hormonal changes
- Drop in blood volume
- Other medical conditions and complications

What are the warning signs?

Some stroke symptoms are easy to mistake as simply normal changes related to pregnancy and having a new baby. The key is to watch for sudden symptoms. They include:

- **NUMBNESS** or weakness of face, arm or leg, especially on one side of the body
- **CONFUSION**, trouble speaking or understanding speech
- **TROUBLE SEEING** in one or both eyes
- **TROUBLE WALKING**, dizziness, loss of balance or coordination
- **SEVERE HEADACHE** with no known cause

Use the letters in F.A.S.T. to spot and react to a stroke

- F = Face Drooping** – Does one side of the face droop or is it numb? Ask the person to smile. Is the person's smile uneven?
- A = Arm Weakness** – Is one arm weak or numb? Ask the person to raise both arms. Does one arm drift downward?
- S = Speech Difficulty** – Is speech slurred?
- T = Time to call 911** – Stroke is an emergency. Every minute counts. Call 911 immediately. Note the time when any of the symptoms first appear.

How can I prevent pregnancy-related stroke?

Researchers are still trying to understand the unique stroke risk factors women face. Some risk factors, such as age, family history and race, can't be changed. However, other lifestyle choices are modifiable. These include:

- Avoid smoking.
- Maintain a healthy weight.
- Eat nutritious foods.
- Stay active.
- Attend all medical appointments, even after delivery.

How is stroke diagnosed?

Fast action is essential when a stroke occurs. To diagnose a stroke, health care professionals will:

- Ask when symptoms began to choose the best treatment.
- Learn your medical history.
- Perform a physical and neurological exam.
- Test your blood.
- Study the results of your brain scans, such as CT (computed tomography) or MRI (magnetic resonance imaging).

What treatment will I need?

It is important to work with a health care team to determine the best recovery plan. Treatment will depend on multiple factors, including the severity of your stroke and how quickly medical care started. Medications may be prescribed to target the blood clot and prevent a future stroke. Your health care team will determine if surgery or other procedures are needed. Physical therapy, speech therapy or other rehabilitation may also be needed.

Monitoring mental health after a stroke is also essential. In addition to postpartum depression, a woman may face other mental health problems after a pregnancy-related stroke. Discuss any anxiety, fear and depression with your health care professional. Many treatments are available to improve these conditions.



HOW CAN I LEARN MORE?

- Call 1-888-4-STROKE (1-888-478-7653) or visit [stroke.org](https://www.stroke.org) or [goredforwomen.org/pregnancy](https://www.goredforwomen.org/pregnancy) to learn more about stroke and pregnancy.
- Connect with other moms who've been where you are and get the support you need by joining our Maternal Health Forum on the Support Network at supportnetwork.heart.org

QUESTIONS FOR YOUR DOCTOR OR NURSE?

Take a few minutes to write down your questions for the next time you see your health care professional.

For example:

Am I at risk for pregnancy-related stroke?

How long should I continue monitoring myself for signs of stroke after delivery?

MY QUESTIONS:

A healthy pregnancy is best for both mom and baby. We have a library of resources to help you stay safe and healthy before, during and after pregnancy. Visit [goredforwomen.org/pregnancy](https://www.goredforwomen.org/pregnancy) to learn more.