

Neurology for You

Stroke risk for young women

Young adult women are at greater risk for cerebrovascular diseases than men. This is due to gender specific risk factors and conditions (e.g. pregnancy). This risk can be reduced by identifying and managing those risk factors with the help of a Stroke Neurologist and your Gynecologist.

Women with migraine with aura (classic migraine) have twice the risk of stroke compared to other women at the same age. This risk is increased with the use of oral contraceptives and tobacco together, so quitting smoking is essential. OCPs may still be taken with caution after a risk assessment.

During pregnancy, women often develop headache and other neurologic symptoms. Most headaches in pregnancy are benign, but some may be due to dangerous conditions including *preeclampsia* or *eclampsia*, *ischemic stroke* (blockage of a blood vessel to the brain), *subarachnoid hemorrhage* (bleeding around the brain), *cerebral venous sinus thrombosis* (a clot in a vein in the head), *pseudotumor cerebri* (an increase in fluid pressure within the skull), *reversible*



cerebral vasoconstriction syndrome, *posterior reversible encephalopathy syndrome*, and *pituitary apoplexy*. These can be diagnosed and treated by a team of an Obstetrician and a Neurologist.

Women with *preeclampsia/eclampsia* have twice the risk of stroke later in life and should undergo a risk assessment with a Stroke Neurologist.

Warning signs for stroke and other concerning headaches

- Usual stroke symptoms: sudden onset of face or limb weakness, inability to speak or understand others, partial vision loss, loss of sensation, poor limb coordination, double vision, difficulty swallowing, poorly articulated speech, and more
- Sudden severe onset
- Sleepiness or lethargy
- Awakening in the middle of the night due to headache
- Peripheral vision loss
- Dimming of vision or worsening of headache with coughing or straining
- Very high or very low blood pressure
- Severe neck pain
- Uncontrollable limb shaking

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STROKE PREVENTION IN YOUNG WOMEN

Stroke and other cerebrovascular diseases affect women more than men, particularly at younger ages. These are the current recommendations for prevention:

[] Women taking **oral contraceptives** should be screened for **high blood pressure** as these can increase blood pressure and stroke risk.

[] Women with **migraine with aura** (classic migraine) should avoid using **tobacco** due to a markedly increased risk of stroke. Use of oral contraceptives may further increase the risk of stroke and should be discussed.

[] Women with **hypertension** prior to pregnancy (or high blood pressure during previous pregnancies) may need to take **low dose aspirin** starting at week 12 of pregnancy until delivery to prevent preeclampsia.

[] **High blood pressure** (moderate or higher, systolic BP ≥ 150 or diastolic BP ≥ 100) during pregnancy may need to be treated with **antihypertensive medications** to prevent stroke or hemorrhage.

[] **Calcium** (≥ 1 gram daily) should be considered for women with low dietary calcium intake to prevent preeclampsia.

[] Women with a history of **preeclampsia** should undergo a **stroke risk assessment** aimed at prevention.

[] Women with **cerebral venous sinus thrombosis** should be evaluated for risk factors for clot formation, be treated with anticoagulation medication, and be followed by a Stroke Neurologist to help manage the condition.