



# Let's Talk About Complications After Stroke

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## Can life-threatening conditions result from a stroke?

Your doctor's highest priorities after a stroke are to prevent complications from the present stroke and to prevent another stroke. Your doctor must determine that you are medically stable and able to resume some self-care activities. This means that all complications must be treated and under control.

Some complications happen as a direct result of injury to the brain due to stroke, or because of a change in the patient's abilities; for example, being unable to move freely can result in bedsores. Clinical depression can also occur with a stroke.



Lack of support or exercise of an arm can result in shoulder pain, a common complication of stroke.

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## What are common complications of stroke?

The most common complications are:

- Edema (eh-DE-mah) — brain swelling after injury.
- Seizures — abnormal electrical activity in the brain causing convulsions.
- Clinical depression — a treatable illness that often occurs with stroke and causes unwanted emotional and physical reactions to changes and losses.
- Bedsores — pressure ulcers that result from decreased ability to move.
- Limb contractures — shortened muscles in an arm or leg from reduced range of motion or lack of exercise.
- Shoulder pain — stems from lack of support or exercise of an arm.
- Blood vessel problems — blood clots form in veins.
- Urinary tract infection and bladder control — urgency and incontinence.
- Pneumonia — causes breathing problems, a complication of many major illnesses.

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## What can be done?

If you need medical treatment, your doctor will prescribe it.

- **Medical treatment** often involves medical supervision, monitoring and drug therapies.
- **Physical treatment** usually involves some type of activity that may be done by you, a

healthcare professional or by both of you working together. Types of treatment may include:

- range-of-motion exercises and physical therapy to avoid limb contracture and shoulder pain and blood vessel problems.

- frequent turning, good nutrition and skin care to avoid bedsores.
- bladder training programs for incontinence.
- swallowing and respiratory therapy, and deep-breathing exercises, all of which help to decrease the risk of pneumonia.

- **Psychological treatment** can include counseling or supportive therapy for feelings that result from clinical depression. Types of treatment may include antidepressant medication, psychotherapy or a combination of both. You may also be referred to a local stroke support group.

## How can I learn more?

- Talk to your doctor, nurse or other healthcare professionals. Ask about other stroke topics. This is one of many *Let's Talk About Stroke* fact sheets available.
- For more information on stroke, or to receive additional fact sheets, call the American Stroke Association at 1-888-4-STROKE (1-888-478-7653) or visit us online at [StrokeAssociation.org](http://StrokeAssociation.org).
- If you or someone you know has had a stroke, call the American

Stroke Association's "Warmline" at 1-888-4-STROKE (1-888-478-7653), and:

- ✓ Speak with other stroke survivors and caregivers, trained to answer your questions and offer support
- ✓ Get information on stroke support groups in your area
- ✓ Sign up to get *Stroke Connection Magazine*, a free publication for stroke survivors and caregivers

## What are the Warning Signs of Stroke?

-  **Sudden weakness or numbness of the face, arm or leg, especially on one side of the body**
-  **Sudden confusion, trouble speaking or understanding**
-  **Sudden trouble seeing in one or both eyes**
-  **Sudden trouble walking, dizziness, loss of balance or coordination**
-  **Sudden, severe headaches with no known cause**



Learn to recognize a stroke.  
*Because time lost is brain lost.*

Today there are treatments that can reduce the risk of damage from the most common type of stroke, but only if you get help quickly – within 3 hours of your first symptoms.

Call 9-1-1 immediately if you experience these warning signs!

## Do you have questions for your doctor or nurse?

Take a few minutes to write your own questions for the next time you see your healthcare provider:

What complications am I most at risk for?

What can I do to prevent complications?

*The statistics in this kit were up to date at publication. For the latest statistics, see the Heart Disease and Stroke Statistics Update at [americanheart.org/statistics](http://americanheart.org/statistics).*

*The American Stroke Association is a division of the American Heart Association. Your contributions will support research and educational programs that help reduce disability and death from stroke.*

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