

## What is a stroke?

There have been great advances in the understanding and treatment of stroke and related problems. Most strokes are due to restriction of blood flow to the brain, leading to the term brain attack . A lesser percentage are due to bleeding (or haemorrhage) into the brain, which is particularly related to high blood pressure.

Patients who are having a stroke may have many different problems. They frequently experience weakness or numbness in one side of the body or face, or part of that side. They may have difficulties with their speech or vision, become confused or have a number of other symptoms. About a third are left with persisting problems for which they need help in caring for themselves. Just as for heart disease, rehabilitation can help considerably.

A full stroke may be preceded by mini-strokes which cause only short-lasting problems. It is very important that these are investigated because not only can tablets like aspirin prevent blood clots in those at risk, but surgery may be appropriate to overcome obstructions in blood vessels in the neck.

## How can strokes be prevented?

High blood pressure and heart disease, especially a particular heart beat irregularity called atrial fibrillation, are the major risk factors for stroke. High blood pressure can be lowered by lifestyle measures such as physical activity, weight loss, and restricting salt and alcohol intake. Blood pressure tablets are frequently necessary and nowadays, a combination of more than one medication is often used to lower blood pressure to safe levels. In patients with atrial fibrillation it may be possible to restore a normal rhythm, or if not, blood thinning with a tablet called warfarin or aspirin is often necessary.

A key message is that a healthy lifestyle can prevent heart disease, stroke and many other important diseases such as diabetes.

*By Professor Andrew Tonkin, National Heart Foundation of Australia*