

## What is stroke?

- A stroke occurs when the blood supply to the brain is blocked or when a blood vessel in or around the brain ruptures, causing brain tissue to die.
- The main types of stroke include:
  - Ischemic stroke, which accounts for about 85% of all strokes and occurs when the vessels that carry oxygen-rich blood to the brain become blocked, resulting in permanent brain injury.
  - Hemorrhagic stroke which occurs when the vessels that carry oxygen-rich blood to the brain break open or rupture releasing blood in or around the brain and damaging brain cells.
- Transient Ischemic Attack (TIA) is a warning sign of a future ischemic stroke and occurs when the blockage of blood supply to the brain lasts only for a very short time. Patients with TIAs have typical stroke symptoms, but the symptoms generally last only minutes or a few hours.
- When stroke symptoms first occur, there is no way to know whether they are from a TIA or from a stroke.
- All strokes and TIAs are medical emergencies.

## How many people are affected by stroke?

- Stroke is the fourth leading cause of death in both the United States (US) and North Carolina (NC).<sup>1,2</sup> In 2012, stroke caused 4,382 deaths in NC. That's one stroke death every two hours and 5.4% of all deaths.<sup>2</sup>
- About 238,000 North Carolinians (3.2% of NC adults) have had a stroke in their lifetime.<sup>3</sup> This estimate excludes people living in long-term care facilities and is therefore probably an underestimate of all those who have suffered a stroke.
- Stroke led to 29,599 hospital admissions (3.1% of all admissions) and \$931.5 million in hospital charges in North Carolina in 2012.<sup>4</sup> That's one stroke hospitalization every 20 minutes and over \$2.5 million in hospital charges for stroke each day.
- The NC Medicaid program spent \$177 million on 38,808 beneficiaries who had a stroke in 2011.<sup>5</sup> That's about \$4,500 per beneficiary with stroke.

## What are the symptoms of stroke or TIA?

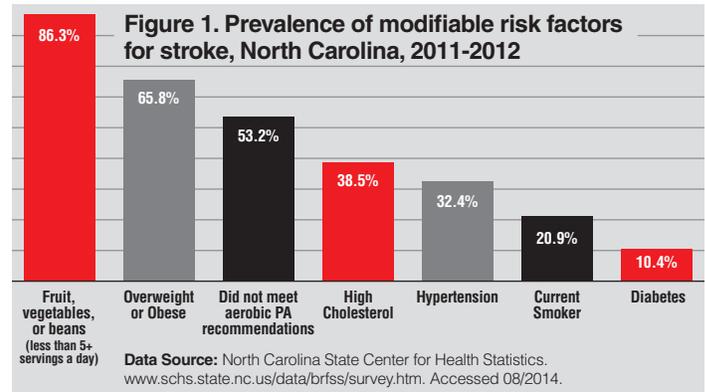
Any combination of the following may occur with stroke or TIA:

- Sudden numbness or weakness in the face, arm or leg.
- Sudden confusion, trouble speaking or difficulty understanding speech.
- Sudden trouble seeing in one or both eyes.
- Sudden trouble walking, dizziness, loss of balance or lack of coordination.
- Sudden severe headache with no known cause.

Although 90% of NC adults say the first thing they would do if they thought someone was having a stroke is to call 9-1-1, only 21% actually know all the signs and symptoms of stroke.<sup>6,7</sup> This means a majority of North Carolinians may not be able to identify a stroke when it occurs. For more information visit: [www.startwithyourheart.com](http://www.startwithyourheart.com).

## What are the risk factors for stroke?

- Non-modifiable risk factors for stroke include age, gender, race/ethnicity, genetics and family history.
- Five modifiable risk factors, including high blood pressure, smoking, obesity, unhealthy diet and physical inactivity account for about 80% of the risk of all strokes.<sup>8</sup> This means if these five factors were eliminated, there would be 80% fewer strokes.
- Other modifiable risk factors for stroke include diabetes, excessive alcohol consumption, high blood lipids (e.g., cholesterol), abnormal heart rhythm (e.g., atrial fibrillation), other heart conditions, sleep apnea and history of a previous stroke. See Figure 1 for the prevalence of key modifiable risk factors for stroke in NC.



- Transient ischemic attack is a warning sign of a future stroke.
  - About one third of people who have TIAs have a stroke within one year if they do not receive treatment.
  - When symptoms first occur, there is no way to know whether they are from a TIA or from a stroke.
  - The highest risk of stroke is over the first few days following a TIA, so it is important to know the symptoms of stroke and to immediately call 9-1-1 if you think you or someone else may be having a stroke or TIA.
- Risk factors specific to women include menopause, use of combined estrogen and progestin as well as estrogen-only pills, the three month period following delivery of a baby and elevated blood pressure during pregnancy.

## What are the complications of stroke?

- Stroke is a leading cause of serious long-term disability.<sup>9</sup>
- Examples of the types of disability caused by stroke include:
  - Muscle weakness on one side of the body (hemiparesis).
  - Inability to walk without assistance.
  - Decline in cognitive function (e.g., perception, attention, memory, language).
  - Depression.
  - Speech difficulties including complete inability to speak (aphasia).
  - Difficulty swallowing.

## How is stroke diagnosed?

- Stroke is diagnosed by a combination of clinical history, findings on physical examination and imaging tests of brain tissue.

## What are the treatment options for stroke?

- Stroke and TIAs are medical emergencies. Treatment for stroke depends on multiple factors including the type of stroke, the patient's overall clinical condition and medical history, and the time that has elapsed since the onset of stroke symptoms.
- It is important to know the symptoms of stroke and to immediately call 9-1-1 if you think you or someone else may be having a stroke. The chance of survival, chance of recovery and degree of lasting disability are affected by the time lapse between the onset of stroke symptoms and the start of treatment.
- Tissue Plasminogen Activator (t-PA, alteplase) is the one drug approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to be used to treat ischemic stroke. If clinical conditions are met, t-PA is approved for use three hours after onset of symptoms, but national guidelines recommend its use for up to 4.5 hours after symptoms first occur.

- There are several specialized surgical procedures that are beneficial in the treatment of strokes.
- Rehabilitation therapy after stroke is an essential component of treatment that can reduce disability and improve quality of life.
- Primary Stroke Centers and Comprehensive Stroke Centers are hospitals certified for the delivery of high quality care (including t-PA) for stroke. Figure 2 shows county-specific death rates and the location of certified stroke treatment centers in North Carolina. For a full listing please visit: <http://www.qualitycheck.org/StrokeCertificationList.aspx>.

### How can stroke be prevented?

- First-time strokes can be prevented by adopting a healthy lifestyle and managing other medical conditions that increase the risk of a stroke.
- Healthy lifestyle practices that help reduce the risk of stroke include:
  - Maintaining a healthy weight or losing weight (for those who are overweight or obese) through physical activity and healthy eating (including reducing sodium intake). For information on physical activity and healthy eating please visit: <https://esmmweighless.com>.
  - Avoiding tobacco products and secondhand smoke for non-smokers and quitting for current smokers. For information about smoking and how to get help quitting please visit: [www.quitline.com](http://www.quitline.com) or call 1-800-QUIT-NOW.
  - Limiting alcohol consumption. Men should have no more than two drinks per day, and women, no more than one. For more information, visit Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Alcohol and Public Health web site: [www.cdc.gov/alcohol](http://www.cdc.gov/alcohol).

- A combination of lifestyle measures and medications may be necessary to control medical conditions that increase the risk of stroke. For fact sheets about diabetes and hypertension in NC visit <http://communityclinicalconnections.com/>.
- People who have had a previous stroke or TIA should work with their health care provider to develop a treatment plan that will help prevent a future stroke. Such a treatment plan may include medications, surgery and/or lifestyle changes.

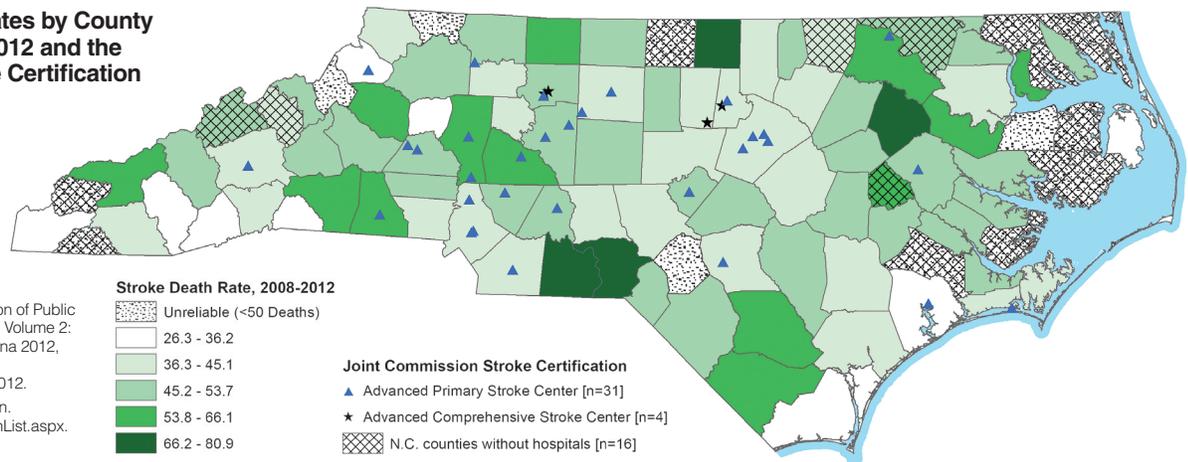
### Disparities, inequality and inequity in the burden of stroke

- North Carolina has the 10th highest age-adjusted stroke death rate among the 50 states and Washington, D.C.<sup>10</sup> This high mortality rate puts NC in the “Stroke Belt,” an eight- to 12-state region that historically has had substantially higher stroke death rates than the rest of the nation.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the eastern counties of NC are part of the “Buckle of the Stroke Belt” (the coastal plains of Georgia, South Carolina, and North Carolina), which has had the highest stroke death rates in the nation for at least the past 30 years.<sup>12</sup>
- Non-Hispanic African-American North Carolinians have higher stroke death rates compared to all other racial/ethnic subgroups.
- African-American North Carolinians are also more likely to die from stroke and at a younger age compared to white non-Hispanic North Carolinians. In 2012, the proportion of stroke deaths occurring before age 65 by race/ethnicity and gender were as follows:
  - 39% among African-American men.
  - 18% among African-American women.
  - 16% among white men.
  - 9% among white women.<sup>13</sup>

**Figure 2. Stroke Death Rates by County of Residence, NC, 2008-2012 and the Joint Commission Stroke Certification**

**Stroke:** ICD-10 codes I60-I69.  
Rates per 100,000 population, age-adjusted to the 2000 U.S. standard population.

**N.C. Data Source:** North Carolina Division of Public Health, State Center for Health Statistics. Volume 2: Leading Causes of Death in North Carolina 2012, SCHS Online Database 2014. [www.schs.state.nc.us/schs/deaths/lcd/2012](http://www.schs.state.nc.us/schs/deaths/lcd/2012).  
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