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Carotid artery surgery

When you need it—and when you don't

There are two large arteries in the front of the neck. They are the carotid arteries, and they take blood to the brain. If one is blocked, it can lead to a stroke.

The surgery to clear a blocked artery is called a “carotid endarterectomy” (CEA). If you have a blocked artery, you may wonder if you need a CEA. But if you haven't had symptoms, you should think twice about having CEA surgery. Here's why:

Surgery usually isn't needed if you don't have symptoms.

If you have had a stroke or mini-stroke (TIA), the CEA surgery may help you avoid another stroke. The surgery is most likely to help if your arteries are very blocked.

But if you have not had a stroke or a mini-stroke, the benefit of surgery is small. There are better ways to reduce the risk of stroke, including lifestyle changes and new medicines.



The surgery has serious risks.

CEA can have serious complications, including stroke, heart attack, and death. You are more likely to have complications if you are age 75 or older or if you have a serious medical condition, such as:

- Diabetes
- Severe heart or lung disease
- Heart failure
- Had a heart attack

The surgery can cost a lot.

This surgery may or may not be covered by your insurance. To obtain an average cost estimate, visit www.HealthcareBlueBook.com.

When should you have carotid artery surgery?

Consider a CEA in the following cases:

- Your carotid artery is severely blocked and has already caused a stroke or mini-stroke. In this case, the surgery can greatly reduce your risk of another stroke.
- You have moderate blockage but you have had a stroke or mini-stroke. A CEA may help if you have it soon after your stroke or mini-stroke.
- You have severe blockage but you have not had a stroke or mini-stroke. You are 40 to 75 years old and your risk of complications from surgery is low.

In this case, make sure your surgeon has a low complication rate for people without symptoms. It should be less than three percent, and preferably much lower. You can find more information at www.consumerreports.org/health/doctors-hospitals/hospital-ratings.htm.

This report is for you to use when talking with your health care provider. It is not a substitute for medical advice and treatment. Use of this report is at your own risk.

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Advice from Consumer Reports

Protect yourself against stroke

Even with surgery, arteries can block up again. To help prevent blockage, consider these steps:

Control your blood pressure.

Check your blood pressure at least once a year. If it is high, control it with a healthy life style and medication.

Lower your cholesterol. Get tested every five years. Ask your doctor about taking a cholesterol-lowering drug, if necessary.

Manage diabetes. Get a blood sugar test every three years if you're 45 or older and you have high blood pressure. Test more often if you're at risk for diabetes. Blood pressure and cholesterol control are particularly important in diabetics.

Prevent blood clots. If you have blocked arteries, ask your doctor about taking aspirin to help prevent clots. Have your pulse checked at every doctor visit. A heart rhythm disorder can lead to blood clots, especially after age 65.

Follow a healthy lifestyle:

- Eat lots of fruits and vegetables.
- Eat low-fat dairy and lean meat.
- Limit salt, saturated fat, and refined sugar.
- Do at least 30 minutes of aerobic exercise five or more days a week.
- Lose excess weight.
- Quit smoking.
- Limit alcohol to two drinks a day for men, and one for women.

Know the signs of a stroke. Call 911 immediately if you suddenly get one of these symptoms:

- Weakness or numbness on one side of the body
- Drooping on one side of the face
- Trouble seeing, speaking, or understanding speech
- Dizziness or loss of coordination
- Severe headache with no known cause

Prevent stroke damage. Learn more at the American Academy of Neurology: www.aan.com.

