Strokes kill almost 130,000 Americans each year and leave many more disabled. They happen when the brain doesn’t get enough blood, either because an artery burst or a clot blocked the blood flow.

“Some risk factors, such as getting older and being male, can’t be changed. But studies have found 10 that can – and together, they account for 90 percent of stroke risk,” says Virgilio Carandang, M.D., a physician affiliated with Memorial Hermann Northwest Hospital. Here are the details:

1. **High blood pressure.** Stroke risk is four to six times higher in those with high blood pressure. Get yours checked regularly.
2. **Diabetes.** High blood sugar damages blood vessels in the brain. People with diabetes have triple the stroke risk of those without the disease. Work with your doctor to manage your blood glucose.
3. **Heart disease.** A misshapen heart or irregular heartbeat could contribute to stroke. To treat your condition, your doctor might recommend surgery or medication.
4. **Abnormal cholesterol.** High levels of LDL or “bad” cholesterol and low levels of HDL or “good” cholesterol clog arteries. Have yours checked at least once every five years.
5. **Waist-to-hip ratio.** Being heavy contributes to all four of the previous risk factors. To maintain a healthy weight, balance the number of calories you eat with your physical activity level.
6. **Unhealthy diet.** Study participants who ate a Mediterranean diet – rich in fish and fruits – had the lowest stroke risk. Load up on fruits, veggies, whole grains and lean proteins.
7. **Not exercising.** Working out keeps your blood flowing and your heart strong. Aim for 30 minutes a day, five days a week. Even 10 minutes offers health benefits.
8. **Smoking.** All forms of tobacco can cause blockages in the arteries leading to the brain. Nicotine also raises blood pressure and thickens the blood.
9. **Drinking alcohol.** Binge drinking thins blood, increasing bleeding risk. Limit alcohol to one drink per day for women or two for men.
10. **Stress.** Constant mental pressure may damage artery walls. To calm down, try positive self-talk. Don’t think, “I can’t do this.” Tell yourself, “I’ll do the best I can.”
Smoke Alarm: Are You At Risk for Lung Cancer?

Usually, the occasional cold or cough turns out to be nothing serious. But if you have been putting up with a dry cough for more than a few weeks, it may be time to see your doctor. While chronic coughing is often a symptom of a condition such as an allergy or bronchitis, it is also one of the warning signs of a killer disease: lung cancer.

Who Is At Risk?
“Many people don’t know that lung cancer is the leading cause of cancer deaths among both men and women in the United States,” says Samuel Smiley, M.D., a board-certified radiologist affiliated with Memorial Hermann Northwest Hospital.

The most significant risk factor for lung cancer is, of course, smoking. About 90 percent of all lung cancers are thought to result from smoking. And, it’s not just cigarette smoking.

Researchers have found that daily cigar smoking also greatly increases lung cancer risk. In addition, nonsmokers who are frequently exposed to the smoke of others face an increased risk. Other risk factors include:
- Smoking marijuana
- Exposure to radon or asbestos
- Lung scarring as a result of tuberculosis or pneumonia
- Family history of lung cancer
- Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)

Lung Cancer Prevention
There is good news about lung cancer: It is one of the most preventable cancers. Because smoking is its main cause, the best way to prevent lung cancer is simply to stay out of the smoke. Avoid secondhand smoke if you are a nonsmoker, and quit if you are a smoker.

Even if you have smoked for decades, stopping now can greatly reduce your risk of developing lung cancer. Quitting also improves your chances of living longer, according to the National Cancer Institute.

The Importance of Early Detection
As with other types of cancer, early detection increases a patient’s chance of survival. Unfortunately, lung cancer is difficult to detect in its earliest stages and often is not discovered until it has spread to other tissues or organs.

“For this reason, it is best to see your doctor as soon as possible if you experience any of the warning signs of lung cancer,” says Arthur Hamberger, M.D., a board-certified radiation oncologist affiliated with Memorial Hermann Northwest. These symptoms include:
- A cough that does not go away
- Chest pain
- Hoarseness
- Weight loss and loss of appetite
- Bloody or rust-colored spit or phlegm
- Shortness of breath
- Fever without a known cause
- Recurring infections such as bronchitis and pneumonia

Schedule a Lung Cancer Screening If you are interested in a lung cancer screening, please talk with your primary care physician or call Memorial Hermann Northwest at 713.867.3336.
Faster Recovery with Minimally Invasive Heart Surgery

Traditional open-heart surgery can be effective for people with heart valve problems and coronary artery disease. However, it can leave patients with a long chest scar, significant postoperative pain and a lengthy recovery. Now, innovative techniques at Memorial Hermann Northwest Hospital are giving heart patients an alternative.

Rather than opening the chest and splitting the breastbone, doctors operate through a small incision between the ribs. Patients have much less pain after surgery, less blood loss and a lower risk of complications.

“The incisions made during minimally invasive heart surgery are 2 to 5 inches, compared with 8 inches for standard surgery,” says Michael Macris, M.D., a physician affiliated with Memorial Hermann Northwest. “Patients leave the hospital sooner and recover much faster.”

Hospital stays are about half as long for patients having minimally invasive heart surgery – four days instead of eight and a half for valve surgery patients, and three days versus six for coronary artery bypass. “Some patients recover in as little as two weeks,” says Dr. Macris. “One of my patients was working on his laptop the day after heart valve surgery.”

Another advantage of minimally invasive bypass surgery is that it can be performed without stopping the heart and putting a patient on a heart-lung machine. This reduces the risk for complications, Dr. Macris says. “However, if you need traditional open-heart surgery, the heart-lung machine is safe for the majority of heart surgery patients,” he says.

“We’re constantly seeking innovative ways to improve and individualize care for our heart patients,” says Dr. Macris. “And it’s a true team effort. Everyone comes together to improve surgical outcomes.”

THE HEART OF GREAT CARE
Our cardiovascular program offers the very best in heart and vascular care and services. To learn more, visit memorialhermann.org/northwest and click on “Heart Center.”
Breast Cancer: When Family History Repeats Itself

The women in your family may share the same curly hair and sense of humor – as well as some of the same health risks.

One disease that can run in families is breast cancer. Most cases are not inherited. However, having a sister or mother who has had this disease can double a woman's risk of getting it herself. “The risk triples for women with two close relatives who have been diagnosed,” says Jibi Thomas, M.D., a physician affiliated with Memorial Hermann Northwest Hospital.

In some families, a history of breast cancer is caused by changes in certain genes. For example, two genes called BRCA1 and BRCA2 are related to higher risks of breast cancer – as well as ovarian and possibly even colorectal cancer. “Breast cancer caused by these genes tends to occur earlier in life and involve both breasts,” says Dr. Thomas.

If you have a family history of breast cancer, ask your doctor about some of the ways you can protect yourself. For example, you might discuss the pros and cons of getting a mammogram before age 40 – the age at which the American Cancer Society recommends most women start getting these screening tests.

Other tests also may be helpful to determine your risks or check for early signs of breast cancer. You may also discuss the benefits and risks of taking a selective estrogen receptor modulator (SERM). This type of medicine can reduce the risk for breast cancer in high-risk women.

A healthy lifestyle is important, too. One study found that many women with strong family histories of breast cancer often don't make lifestyle changes.

Risk-reducing strategies may include exercising, not smoking, staying at a healthy weight, eating plenty of fruits and vegetables, and limiting alcohol.

Dr. Thomas specializes in breast imaging.

TALK WITH YOUR DOCTOR about being referred for genetic testing or call 713.867.2062 for more information.