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Abuse of Drugs or Alcohol Linked to Stroke Early in Life

Drug abuse or heavy drinking can cause long-term changes in the heart, arteries or blood that increase the risk of stroke in young adults, a new study finds.

The study of more than 1,000 patients found that young adults who suffered a stroke were more likely to be smokers or to have abused drugs or alcohol, compared with their peers who did not have a stroke, NBC News reports.

S. Andrew Josephson, a neurologist from the University of California, San Francisco, who was not involved in the study, said it is possible that some drugs, such as cocaine and methamphetamine, may be more likely to trigger a stroke. "When a young person has a stroke, it is probably much more likely that the cause of their stroke is something other than traditional risk factors," such as smoking or high blood pressure, he noted.

The researchers from the University of Cincinnati found that in 2005, about half of young adults who had a stroke were smokers, and one in five used illicit drugs, including marijuana and cocaine. They found 13 percent of the stroke patients had used drugs or alcohol within 24 hours of their stroke.

The study appears in the journal Stroke.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, stroke kills almost 130,000 Americans each year. Although stroke risk increases with age, strokes can occur at any age. In 2009, 34 percent of people hospitalized for stroke were under the age of 65.