

## Stroke study finds neck stent safe, effective

It may replace surgery for thousands

By Marilynn Marchione  
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SAN ANTONIO — People at risk of a stroke because of narrowed neck arteries can be safely treated with a less drastic option than the surgery done now, the largest study ever done on these treatments concludes.

If Medicare agrees to cover it, hundreds of thousands of Americans a year might be able to have an artery-opening procedure and a stent instead of surgery to remove built-up plaque, doctors said. A stent is a wire-mesh tube that props the blood vessel open.

Stents have long been used to fix heart arteries but are approved for use in the neck only for people too sick for surgery. The new study, in people with less severe disease, suggested stents may find much wider use.

"The sea of people is gigantic" who could benefit, said Dr. Walter Koroshetz, deputy director of the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, the study's main sponsor.

The results of the study didn't surprise Dr. John Barr, a San Diego interventional neuroradiologist who is affiliated with Scripps Memorial Hospital La Jolla and Scripps Memorial Hospital Encinitas.

"This is what we've been observing, but it has literally taken three decades to develop the technology to this point and prove that it works," he said.

Barr was a principal investigator for the study while working at Baptist Memorial Hospital in Memphis, Tenn. He relocated to San Diego in July.

"We now have two safe and effective methods" to treat neck vessels, said Dr. Thomas Brott of the Mayo Clinic in Jacksonville, Fla. He led the study and gave results yesterday at an American Stroke Association conference.

However, the treatments have different complications, and not all doctors are convinced stents are as safe. Three previous studies found they weren't, including one published online Thursday by the British journal *The Lancet*.

The reason: Even though stents prevent strokes in the long run, the procedure can trigger a stroke if a bit of plaque travels to the brain.

The study revealed a trade-off: Strokes were a more frequent complication with stents, while heart attacks were more common after surgery.

Doctors said which option a patient chooses may depend on their general health, what risks they're willing to accept and how badly they want to avoid surgery.

Surveys showed people worry more about stroke than a heart attack, said Dr. Lee Schwamm, a top neurologist at Massachusetts General Hospital.

"They're terrified of surviving a stroke with major disability ... ending their years in a nursing home," he said.

About 795,000 Americans each year suffer a stroke. Many are caused by a clot that forms in a narrowed neck artery and travels to the brain. Doctors can check for narrowed arteries by using a stethoscope to listen for abnormal sounds in neck arteries, and a painless ultrasound test can show blockages.

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Staff writer Keith Darce contributed to this report.