



FIGURE 446-3 Pathophysiology of ischemic stroke. **A.** Diagram illustrating the three major mechanisms that underlie ischemic stroke: (1) occlusion of an intracranial vessel by an embolus that arises at a distant site (e.g., cardiogenic sources such as atrial fibrillation or artery-to-artery emboli from carotid atherosclerotic plaque), often affecting the large intracranial vessels; (2) in situ thrombosis of an intracranial vessel, typically affecting the small penetrating arteries that arise from the major intracranial arteries; (3) hypoperfusion caused by flow-limiting stenosis of a major extracranial (e.g., internal carotid) or intracranial vessel, often producing “watershed” ischemia. **B.** and **C.** Diagram and reformatted computed tomography angiogram of the common, internal, and external carotid arteries. High-grade stenosis of the internal carotid artery, which may be associated with either cerebral emboli or flow-limiting ischemia, was identified in this patient.

The most significant causes of cardioembolic stroke in most of the world are nonrheumatic (often called nonvalvular) atrial fibrillation, MI, prosthetic valves, rheumatic heart disease, and ischemic cardiomyopathy (Table 446-2). Cardiac disorders causing brain embolism are discussed in the chapters on heart diseases. A few pertinent aspects are highlighted here.

Nonrheumatic atrial fibrillation is the most common cause of cerebral embolism overall. The presumed stroke mechanism is thrombus formation in the fibrillating atrium or atrial appendage, with subsequent embolization. Patients with atrial fibrillation have an average annual risk of stroke of ~5%. The risk of stroke can be estimated by calculating the CHADS2 score (Table 446-3). Left atrial enlargement is an additional risk factor for formation of atrial thrombi. Rheumatic heart disease usually causes ischemic stroke when there is prominent mitral stenosis or atrial fibrillation. Recent MI may be a source of emboli, especially when transmural and involving the anteroapical ventricular wall, and prophylactic anticoagulation following MI has been shown to reduce stroke risk. Mitral valve prolapse is not usually a source of emboli unless the prolapse is severe.

Paradoxical embolization occurs when venous thrombi migrate to the arterial circulation, usually via a patent foramen ovale or atrial septal defect. Bubble-contrast echocardiography (IV injection of agitated saline coupled with either transthoracic or transesophageal echocardiography) can demonstrate a right-to-left cardiac shunt, revealing the conduit for paradoxical embolization. Alternatively, a right-to-left shunt is implied if immediately following IV injection of agitated saline, the ultrasound signature of bubbles is observed during transcranial Doppler insonation of the MCA; pulmonary arteriovenous malformations should be considered if this test is positive yet an echocardiogram fails to reveal an intracardiac shunt. Both techniques are highly sensitive for detection of right-to-left shunts. Besides venous clot, fat and tumor emboli, bacterial endocarditis, IV air, and amniotic fluid emboli at childbirth may occasionally be responsible for paradoxical embolization. The importance of a patent foramen ovale (PFO) as a

cause of stroke is debated, particularly because they are present in ~15% of the general population. Some studies have suggested that the risk is only elevated in the presence of a coexisting atrial septal aneurysm. The presence of a venous source of embolus, most commonly a deep venous thrombus, may provide confirmation of the importance of a PFO with an accompanying right-to-left shunt in a particular case. Three randomized trials of PFO occlusion for secondary prevention of ischemic stroke were negative, although each lacked sufficient power to be conclusive. At present, there is no supportive evidence to offer percutaneous PFO closure for stroke prevention.

Bacterial endocarditis can be a source of valvular vegetations that give rise to septic emboli. The appearance of multifocal symptoms and signs in a patient with stroke makes bacterial endocarditis more likely. Infarcts of microscopic size occur, and large septic infarcts may evolve into brain abscesses or cause hemorrhage into the infarct, which generally precludes use of anticoagulation or thrombolytics. Mycotic aneurysms caused by septic emboli may also present as SAH or intracerebral hemorrhage.

Artery-to-Artery Embolic Stroke Thrombus formation on atherosclerotic plaques may embolize to intracranial arteries producing an artery-to-artery embolic stroke. Less commonly, a diseased vessel may acutely thrombose. Unlike the myocardial vessels, artery-to-artery embolism, rather than local thrombosis, appears to be the dominant vascular mechanism causing large-vessel brain ischemia. Any diseased vessel may be an embolic source, including the aortic arch, common carotid, internal carotid, vertebral, and basilar arteries.

CAROTID ATHEROSCLEROSIS Atherosclerosis within the carotid artery occurs most frequently within the common carotid bifurcation and proximal internal carotid artery; the carotid siphon (portion within the cavernous sinus) is also vulnerable to atherosclerosis. Male gender, older age, smoking, hypertension, diabetes, and hypercholesterolemia are risk factors for carotid disease, as they are for stroke in general (Table 446-4). Carotid atherosclerosis produces an estimated 10% of