



## Coping with Stress

There's no question about it - life is stressful. Our hectic lives are packed with so many demands and so much responsibility that we sometimes feel as though we're living in a pressure cooker.

### How stress affects the body

According to MayoClinic.com, a health information service from Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, your body reacts to stress as though you were facing a physical threat. In fact, this reaction helped early humans fight aggressors or run from predators. It helped them survive.

Often referred to as the "fight-or-flight" response, the stress reaction occurs automatically when you feel threatened. An alarm system goes off deep in your brain, and that leads to the release of a flood of stress hormones into your bloodstream. These hormones - including cortisol and adrenaline - focus your concentration, speed your reaction time, and increase your strength and agility.

Once you've "fought," "fled," or otherwise taken care of your stressful situation, the levels of cortisol and adrenaline in your bloodstream decline. As a result, your heart rate and blood pressure return to normal and your digestion and metabolism resume a regular pace.

When stressful situations pile up one after another, however, your body has no chance to recover. This long-term activation of the stress-response system can disrupt almost all your body's processes, increasing your risk of obesity, insomnia, digestive complaints, heart disease, and depression.<sup>1</sup>

According to Mayo Clinic, stress commonly impacts the body in a variety of ways:

- Digestive system - People with high levels of stress often experience stomach aches, diarrhea, and an increase or decrease of appetite.
- Immune system - Chronic stress tends to dampen the immune system, making you more susceptible to colds and other infections. For some people, stress can have the opposite effect, making the immune system overactive. The result can be an increased risk of autoimmune disorders, in which the immune system attacks the body's own cells. For example, stress can trigger sporadic flare-ups of the symptoms of lupus.
- Nervous system - When you experience constant stress, your hormones may produce persistent feelings of anxiety, helplessness, and impending doom. Stress also has been linked to depression and sleep disturbances.
- Cardiovascular system - The high levels of cortisol produced by stress can raise your heart rate and increase blood pressure and blood lipid (cholesterol and triglyceride) levels. These are risk factors for both heart attack and stroke.
- Skin conditions - Stress worsens many skin conditions, such as psoriasis, eczema, hives, and acne.
- Asthma - Stress can serve as a trigger for asthma attacks.

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Although stress has long been thought to cause stomach ulcers, many health experts now believe such ulcers are primarily caused by the bacteria *H. Pylori*. Stress may aggravate a stomach ulcer, but it's probably not at the root of this painful problem.

## Untying the knots

The idea of letting go of life's "small stuff" is a good one - the less you worry, the easier it is for you to manage stress and limit its impact on your health. Stress is an inevitable part of life. It's up to you to learn how to cope with it in the best possible manner.

1. Identify the things in your life that cause you stress. Whether you're stressed by marital problems, work conflicts, a death or illness in the family, or financial woes, once you identify your stressors, you can determine ways to change your environment to manage them.
2. If you have a problem that can be solved, take control and solve it. One of the biggest contributors to stress is a lack of control. While you can't control everything in life (traffic, illness, etc.), there are certain things you can take charge of-namely, your reaction to those issues.
3. Utilize tools to help manage your stress, including:
  - Exercise. Exercise is a positive and active way to relieve your tension and frustration. It can remove you from stressful moments or locations, recharge your batteries, and leave you with a fit body that is more resistant to stress in the first place. Exercise also causes the release of endorphins, or "feel good" hormones.
  - Relaxation techniques. Techniques such as meditation, prayer, yoga, deep breathing, and progressive muscle relaxation are effective ways to quiet down and relax.
  - Social support. Studies of people who remain happy and healthy despite many life stresses conclude that most have solid networks of social support.
  - Seeking help from a professional. Don't ever feel afraid or ashamed to seek professional advice. After all, professionals understand how to help people through stressful times and learn to cope better. They can help you look objectively at stressful situations.
  - Time management. Learn to set priorities, budget time, set realistic goals, avoid procrastination and over-commitment, say "no," anticipate, and plan ahead.
4. Take care of yourself. Make time to eat a healthy diet and get plenty of sleep (seven to nine hours per night) in order to deal with stress more effectively. Allow time for relaxation and play. Limit or avoid caffeine and steer clear of supplements claiming to be "stress formulas." Remember that excessive alcohol consumption and smoking are not healthy means of reducing stress.
5. Look for signs of stress in your children. Just as you get stressed out over deadlines and obligations, so do your children. Even preschoolers feel stressed; their greatest source of anxiety is separation from mom and dad. Be sure your children get plenty of rest and exercise, and eat well-balanced meals. Monitor their activities so they don't become overextended and burned out. Encourage them to talk to you when they feel stressed or worried.

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Keep in mind that chronic stress can be associated with mental conditions like depression and anxiety disorders, in addition to physical problems. Talk with your health care provider if you experience:

- Difficulty sleeping
- Extreme changes in appetite
- Panic attacks
- Muscle tenderness and soreness
- Frequent headaches
- Gastrointestinal problems
- Prolonged feelings of sadness or worthlessness<sup>2</sup>

## Learn more

Stress doesn't have to rule your life. You can learn not to "sweat the small stuff." Talk to your doctor or other health care professional about additional ways you can manage stress- instead of letting it manage you.

1. [Stress: Unhealthy response to the pressures of life.](#) MayoClinic.com. 12 September 2006.
2. Wein, Harrison, Ph.D. ["Stress and Disease: New Perspectives."](#) The NIH Word on Health. National Institutes of Health. October 2000.

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