



How Stress Affects Your Health

Stress can have far-ranging negative effects on your health. Learn what happens when you live with long-term stress.

When stress grips your body, you know it. Your heart starts pounding, your muscles tense, your stomach feels tied in knots. Sometimes this response can be a good thing. It may help you escape from an attacker or win your tennis game. But if stress doesn't let up, it can have far-ranging negative effects on your physical health.

The stages of stress

Over 50 years ago a scientist named Hans Selye recognized that stress was a major cause of illness. He broke the stress response into three stages, which he called the **general adaptation syndrome**.

- **The alarm stage** occurs when you are frightened or under threat. Your body goes on red alert, releasing stress hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol. These increase strength and concentration. Your heart speeds up, sending more blood and oxygen to your muscles so you can take quick action. This "fight or flight" response can be lifesaving, but if it is prolonged it can take a toll on your body.
- **The resistance stage** occurs after the initial extreme reaction. Your body tries to adapt to the continued stress. It remains on alert but at a lower level while it tries to resume its normal functions. If the stress passes, you can start to rebuild your defenses. If it becomes long-term, you move to the third stage.
- **The exhaustion stage** is the "burnout" or overload phase. Continued pounding by stress depletes your body's reserves, which puts you at risk for disease.

This sequence may happen in response to either a physical threat (such as being in a car accident) or an emotional one (such as being laid off from your job). Facing multiple long-term stressors piles extra strain on your system and can quickly lead to exhaustion.

The effects of stress

Stress can have effects throughout your body on both your physical and mental health. It can affect:

- **Digestion.** Stress hormones slow the release of stomach acid and interfere with how well the stomach can empty itself. This can cause stomachaches. These same hormones cause the colon to work faster and may lead to diarrhea.
- **Heart, brain and blood vessels.** High levels of the stress hormone cortisol increase your heart rate and your blood pressure. Cortisol can also raise your cholesterol levels. These factors raise your risk for heart attacks and strokes.
- **Immune system.** Normally, your immune system responds to infections by releasing chemicals that aid in the healing process. The stress response weakens your immune system, slowing wound healing and making you more likely to get colds and infections.
- **Weight.** Cortisol makes you crave fats and carbohydrates, which can cause you to gain weight. Cortisol also makes you more likely to put on weight in your abdominal area. Weight gain in this area raises your risk for heart disease and diabetes.
- **Mental health.** Being bombarded with stress hormones creates a constant state of tension

and anxiety. Over time this can set you up for depression, headaches or other problems, especially if they run in the family. Also, because your body is in a heightened state of arousal, you may have trouble sleeping.

Regaining your balance

If stress has taken over your life, it's time to regain some control. Your health depends on it. Here are some ideas:

- **Make time for regular moderate exercise.** It's one of the best stress-busters, and it can improve your mood and help control your weight. Check with your doctor to see what activity level is right for you.
- **Spend some time doing things you enjoy.** Go to a funny movie, take your kids fishing or have dinner with a dear friend.
- **Learn some relaxation techniques,** such as deep breathing or meditation.
- **Treat yourself well.** Make time for healthy meals and getting enough sleep. Avoid smoking, drinking too much and overeating.

If you still cannot get a handle on your stress, talk to your doctor. He or she might recommend a counselor who could help you find other ways to reduce or manage the stress in your life.