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Understanding the Stress/Health Connection

Stress exists in your mind — but it's also evident in your stomach, heart, muscles and even your toes.

"In fact, stress may affect every cell in your body," says Ronald Glaser, Ph.D., a researcher at Ohio State University Medical School.

During stressful times, your body produces various chemicals, including cortisol, an immune-suppressing hormone. The more cortisol produced, the weaker your immune cells become and the more susceptible you are to illness.

"A one-day stressor isn't going to make a big change in your risk of getting a cold, for example," says Dr. Glaser. "But a chronic stressor that lasts a few weeks could dampen your immune response and create a risk of disease."

Migraine headaches, sleep disorders, backaches, skin rashes, fatigue, irritability, headache, depression, worry, mood swings, chest pain, anxiety, upset stomach, ulcers, and high blood pressure are common reactions to stress.

By gaining a better understanding of the stress/disease connection, you can reduce your stress and, in turn, improve your health and well-being.

Keeping stress in check

No one can avoid all stress — and a certain amount actually is good for you. But it's best to keep unhealthy levels in check.

The following steps can help you control everyday stress:

- Recognize your stress signals. Once you're aware of your stressors, you'll have a better idea of when you're stressed and can take steps to reduce them.
- Notice when you're most vulnerable to stress and prepare yourself. Are you most affected in the mornings? On Mondays? In the winter?
- Exercise. Aerobic workouts — walking, cycling, swimming, or running — can release pent-up frustrations while producing endorphins, brain chemicals that counteract stress.
- Eat a healthful diet. A balanced diet can help stabilize your mood.
- Communicate with friends and family. Social ties relieve stress and contribute to a positive attitude.
- Spend time enjoying your hobbies. Doing so allows you to focus on a pleasurable activity instead of your problems.
- Try relaxation techniques. Meditation, creative imagery, visualization, deep-breathing exercises, yoga, and listening to relaxation tapes can help you relax.
- Learn to set limits. Don't agree to unnecessary, stressful obligations.
- Get enough sleep. Stress interferes with relaxation, making it hard to get a good night's sleep, which can lead to fatigue and a reduced ability to cope. To get the best sleep possible, try to go to bed and wake up at the same time every day.
- Steer clear of caffeine. Caffeine can add to your anxiety, making you feel even more stressed.
- Avoid alcohol and drugs. Using alcohol or other drugs to relieve stress only masks symptoms and can worsen stress in the long run.
- Learn something new. The excitement of learning something new, such as how to speak a different language or play a musical instrument, can make your worries seem far away.
- Take a breather. Stressful situations can make you breathe more shallowly or hold your breath. When you have to relax fast, belly breathing can be done in seconds. To do it: Concentrate on making your abdomen move out as you inhale through your nose, then in as you exhale. Using imagery as you belly breathe can help you further deepen and slow the pace of your breathing. As you inhale, close your eyes and imagine the air swirling into your nose and down into your lungs. As you exhale, imagine the air swirling back out again.

Combating serious stress

"In combating serious stress, you should first carefully appraise the seriousness of the situation and the adequacy of your coping resources," says Kenneth B. Matheny, Ph.D., A.B.P.P., director of counseling psychology at Georgia State University in Atlanta.

When faced with a highly stressful event in your life — perhaps the death of a loved one, a life-threatening illness or a serious financial loss — the following strategies will help you cope:

- Avoid unnecessary changes in your life. Instead, reserve what energy you do have for dealing with the stressor at hand. If possible, stabilize your work and home environments while working out the primary problem.
- Quiet your mind. In times of stress, the mind makes things seem worse than they are by creating endless versions of impending disaster. Because the body can't tell the difference between fact and fantasy, it responds with heightened physical response.
- Keep in the present. You can calm both your mind and body by keeping your mind in the present, which is seldom as stressful as an imagined future or regrettable past. To keep your mind in the present, focus your attention on your breathing, a sound or visual pattern, a repetitive movement, or meditation.
- Courageously and aggressively face the stressor. Resist any temptation to ignore the stressor. Instead, carefully appraise the seriousness of the problem without magnifying it out of proportion. In addition, confirm your view of the stressor by talking with others. Make a special effort to speak to family, friends, or co-workers who have dealt with similar experiences.
- Take inventory of your coping responses. Confidence is a valuable ally in combating stress, and it builds on memories of past successes. Review successes you've had with other stressful life situations. Recall some of the specific things you did to cope.
- Take action. Commit yourself to a reasonable course of action to deal with the stressor. Action is a powerful stress-reducer. Research shows the body lowers its production of epinephrine, a powerful stress hormone, when a person shifts into action.

- Take time out to relax. At least once or twice a day, take time to decompress by relaxing — perhaps by listening to soothing music, taking a walk, gardening, reading, or exercising.

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