

Stress

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What is it?

Stress is caused by the body's instinct to defend itself. It is the response to life's every day demands and changes. What may be stressful is different for each person. It's not just change or the event itself, but also how you react to it that matters.

What causes it?

Stress occurs when the body does not adjust properly to internal or external stimuli. The body's reaction to highly stressful situations is known as the "fight-or-flight" response. Under these circumstances, *epinephrine* or adrenaline (a hormone produced by the adrenal glands), is released into the blood. This stimulates the liver to provide the body with stored carbohydrates for extra energy. Other changes include quickened heart beat and breathing, and increased blood pressure and muscle tension. This instinct is good in emergencies, but can cause physical symptoms if it goes on for too long, such as in response to life's daily challenges and changes.

When this happens, it is as though your body gets ready to jump out of the way of a car, but you're sitting still. Your body is working overtime with no place to put all the extra energy. This can make you feel anxious, afraid, worried, and uptight.

Any sort of change can make you feel stressed, even good change. Examples of stressful change include being laid off, your child leaving or returning home, the death of your spouse, divorce or marriage, illness, an injury, a job promotion, money problems, moving, or having a baby.

What are the symptoms?

Stress can cause health problems or make problems worse if you don't learn to deal with it. Talk to your family doctor if you think some of your symptoms are due to stress. It's important to make sure that your symptoms aren't caused by other health problems.

Signs of stress

- Anxiety or panicky feeling
- Back pain
- Constipation or Diarrhea
- Depression
- Disorganization and poor concentration
- Fatigue
- Frustration and Irritability
- Headaches
- Heartburn
- High blood pressure
- Insomnia
- Resentment
- Shortness of breath
- Stiff neck and muscle tension
- Upset stomach
- Weight gain or loss

How do you prevent it?

The first step is to learn to recognize when you are feeling stressed. Early warning signs of stress may include tension in your shoulders and neck, or you may clench your hands and fists. With your doctor's help, you can learn to identify things in your life that are causing stress and you can learn to become aware of how your body reacts to the stress.

The next step is to choose a way to deal with your stress. One way is to avoid the event or thing that leads to your stress - but this is often not possible. A second way is to change how you react to stress. In many cases this is the best way.

Tips on preventing stress

- Don't worry about the things you can't control, like the weather
- Do something about things you can control
- Prepare to the best of your ability for events you know may be stressful
- Work to solve conflicts with other people
- Ask for help from friends, family, or professionals
- Set realistic goals at home or at work
- Establish a reminder system to help prevent worrying about forgetting something
- Finish the most unpleasant tasks first
- Get away from your daily stresses with group sports, social events, hobbies
- Don't try to do more than you really can. Say no if someone asks you to do something you don't have time to do
- Try to look at change as a challenge, not a threat

Can it be treated?

Some stress is unavoidable, and to a certain extent, it gives us energy and enthusiasm. The goal is to control unproductive stress.

- **Exercise** is a good way to deal with stress because it is a healthy way to relieve your pent up energy and tension. It also helps you get in better shape which makes you feel better overall. Walking is one of nature's best tranquilizers, so relax by taking a walk in a quiet spot, or work off tension through a favorite sport.

- **Meditation** can take many forms and can be quite helpful. You may do it with exercise that uses the same motions over and over, like walking or swimming. You may also do it by practicing relaxation training, by stretching, or by breathing deeply.

Relaxation training is easy. Start by choosing a muscle and holding it tight for a few seconds. Many people find it helps to start with the muscles of the feet and work your way up, relaxing the muscle after a few seconds. Do this with all of your muscles.

Stretching can also help relieve tension. Roll your head in a gentle circle. Reach toward the ceiling and bend side to side slowly. Roll your shoulders. All of these things can help you to relax.

Deep, relaxed breathing by itself may help relieve stress. Breathing from your *diaphragm* (the muscle between your heart and stomach) helps you get plenty of oxygen. You should lie down on a flat surface and place one hand on your stomach just above your navel. Place your other hand on your chest. Breathe in slowly and try to make your stomach rise a little. Hold your breath for at least several seconds. Breathe out slowly and let your stomach go back down.

While you're meditating don't try to stop yourself from thinking about other things. Just try not to focus on any one thing for too long. Let your thoughts flow.

- **Sleep hygiene** is also important to be well rested. Avoid tobacco, caffeine, salt, and excess calories so you will feel better, and sleep better. Try to do something quiet just before bed, or take a warm bath. Establish a regular bedtime and wake up time.

Are there complications?

Although it is widely believed that stress plays an important role in many illnesses, its exact mechanism is unclear. Complications include reduced resistance to infection, heart attacks, stroke, impotence, incontinence, ulcers, and irritable bowel syndrome.

In summary

- Stress is caused by the body's "fight-or-flight" instinct to defend itself.
- Most stress is caused by change, either good or bad change.
- How you react to stress is more important than the stress itself.
- The best treatment is to avoid as much stress as possible.
- Your goal should be to control unproductive stress.