

What You Should Know About Stress

Points to remember:

- Stress is a natural part of life. It is a response to changes – good or bad – in your life.
- Too much stress may help promote heart disease.
- You can learn to manage your stress response in a healthy way.

What does stress mean to you?

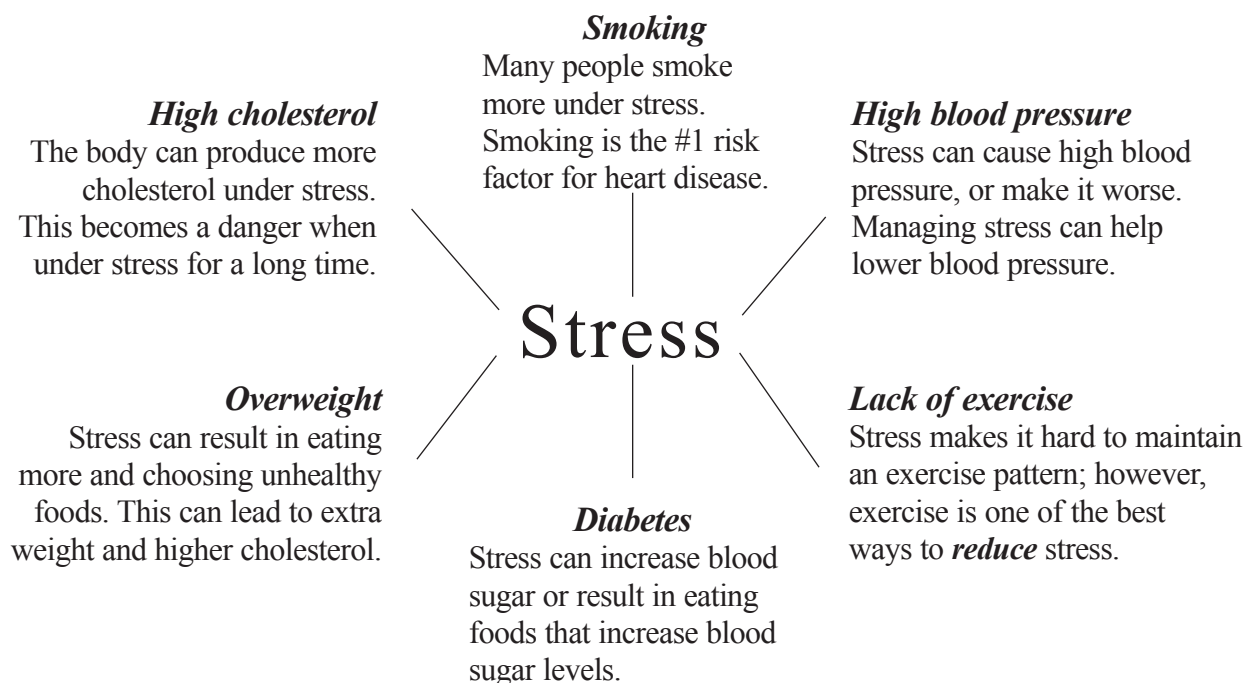
Too much to do and not enough time to do it? Family crises? Health problems? New job? Any change, good or bad, small or large, can bring on (or “trigger”) stress. Stress is how you respond to these changes. You can’t avoid all the things that trigger your stress, you’re right. But **you can control your inner stress level.**

What does stress do to your body?

Any change in your life sets off certain changes in your body. For example, your heart rate increases, blood vessels constrict, muscles tense. This is a normal response to help you deal with the life change. Once you’ve done that, your body can relax again and return to normal.

Then why should stress be a problem?

Sometimes changes keep coming one after the other. If you don’t have ways to deal with them, you can become overstressed. Your body stays geared up and can’t relax. This can lead to physical problems, including heart disease. Too much stress increases a person’s risk for heart disease. It can also make other risk factors worse (see below).



You can manage your stress level

You are in control of how you respond to your triggers for stress. But even so, you need some good ways to do that. These next pages will help you get started.

Know your stress triggers and signals

To understand what stress means to you and how you respond to it, ask yourself:

- What are your signals of stress? Look at the examples of stress signals in the next column. Do any of them apply to you? Or can you name other signs your mind and body send you when you are under stress?
- What triggers these signals? Think back over the past week and try to remember what things brought on your stress signals.

Major life events – such as injury, illness, change in job status, or death in the family – will cause stress. But more than likely, much of your stress is triggered by everyday events, such as:

- Arguments
- Car problems
- Meeting new people
- Being late or waiting for others
- Dieting
- ... And the list goes on

Keep your body “tuned up”

You keep your car tuned up – why not your body?

- Exercise. Regular activity, such as walking, cycling, or swimming, can help strengthen your body and serve as a great outlet for tension.
- Stretch those muscles. Learn some good stretching exercises for your neck, back, arms, and legs, especially if you sit at a desk much of the day.
- Eat a well-balanced diet, rich in whole grains, fruits, and vegetables, and low in fats and sugars. This will help you function at your best.
- Get enough rest. Most people need six to nine hours of sleep each night.
- Cut down on caffeine and nicotine.

Stress signals (examples)

Body signals

- Headaches, muscle tension
- Fatigue
- Rapid or irregular heartbeat
- Cold or sweaty hands or feet
- Upset stomach/heartburn
- Weight gain

Behavior signals

- Nervous tic or habit
- More smoking, drinking, eating
- Irritability or short temper
- Crying

Mental/emotional signals

- Sense of loss of control
- Worry, anxiety
- Anger
- Difficulty concentrating

Other stress signals you have:

- _____
- _____
- _____

Try to problem-solve

Think about your stress triggers – those everyday events that bring on stress. When they occur, can you try to handle them in one of these ways?

- **Avoid.** Can you prevent or avoid the situation? You can't always do this, but there may be times you can. For example, you may be able to walk away from an argument or avoid an area that is too busy or noisy for you.
- **Alter.** Can you change the situation? Can you leave earlier for work if traffic is heavy? Can you bring something to keep you busy as you wait in the doctor's office?
- **Adapt.** Can you change your response to the situation? For this, you need tools to work with and practice. Please see the next page.

Tools of the trade

Most people can't just will themselves to change overnight. Your usual responses to stress have been with you for a long time. To change those responses you will need to plan and practice. Here are a few tools you might like - try them one at a time, until you find those that work for you.

Emergency stress stoppers

To help prevent a small problem from building into a big one:

- Call a "time out" or walk away. Stop whatever triggered the stress until you feel calmer.
- Walk! Exercise is the best natural tranquilizer there is.
- If you find yourself thinking a negative thought ("I can't do this"), try to replace it right away with a positive one ("I can learn to do this if I just take it one step at a time").
- Break up a big problem into smaller steps. Set small goals for each day to tackle the problem.
- Don't let others lay their stress on you. Listen to their problems – but don't feel that you have to solve them.
- Talk it out with someone you trust – a family member, friend, clergy member, or health care professional. These people are your build-in support system. The worst thing you can do is to keep all your stress inside. The people you know and trust can help you!

Deep breathing

You find yourself facing a stressful situation, or you're caught in the middle of one. What can you do? Slow down your stress response by taking deep breaths:

- Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose.
- Then exhale slowly through your mouth.
- Tell yourself to relax each time you exhale.
- Repeat several times.

You can do this any time, sitting or standing. The deep breaths will help you release tension and help your body relax.

Relaxation technique

This is a little more involved than deep breathing. It's a great way to reduce stress and help you relax your mind and body. Practice this at least once a day. Here are the basic steps:

- Sit quietly in a comfortable position. Choose a time and place where you won't be interrupted.
- Close your eyes and slowly try to relax all the muscles in your body.
- Take slow deep breaths through your nose. Try to focus your mind on one word or pleasant image. If your mind wanders, try to ignore other thoughts and focus on your word or image.
- Continue this for 5 minutes (you may eventually work up to 10 or 20 minutes). Sit quietly for a few minutes, then stretch your muscles and continue with your activities.

Positive self-talk

Believe it or not, the way you talk to yourself can be your best friend in dealing with stress. A negative message ("I can't change, I'm too set in my ways") works against you. A positive message ("I know with practice I can handle this") works for you. When you are under stress, does your self-talk help you feel better or worse? Changing negative messages to positive ones will help you gain control over your emotions and actions.

Other resources to think about

Many hospitals, clinics, and counselors offer stress management programs. Many people also find it helpful to talk with a trained therapist about the stress in their lives. If you need help or want to find out more about what's available near you, call your health care provider.

A final note

Stress can sometimes cause physical symptoms. But don't ever ignore serious symptoms just because you think they are due to stress. Seek help right away for symptoms such as chest pain or pressure, unexplained dizziness or an irregular heartbeat that does not return to normal.

The information presented is intended for general information and educational purposes. It is not intended to replace the advice of your health care provider. Contact your health care provider if you believe you have a health problem.