

Stress and Your Body

Today, it's common knowledge that what happens mentally and emotionally has a significant effect on the physical, and vice versa—so what about *stress*? Physically, stress isn't always a bad thing. Stress hormones are what help people out in emergency situations, allowing their bodies to move into lifesaving action. Also, it's actually good for people to deal with some stress in order to build up a tolerance for stressful situations. The problem comes when people are on overload or have to handle too much stress too often. It's then that stress affects people in ways they might not always be aware of.



Physical Impact of Stress

Everyone is familiar with signs of stress such as nervousness, anxiety, and depression, as well as the other ways stressors can upset a person's state of mind. Here's a look at what stress can do to people's bodies:

- **Heart Disease**—Added up, daily stress can lead to heart attacks. Type A personalities have an extremely high risk of developing abnormal heart rhythms, and the normal stress of everyday life negatively affects people already prone to heart disease.
- **Strokes**—People who are highly stressed, and even moderately stressed on a regular basis, have a significantly increased risk of a fatal stroke.
- **High Blood Pressure**—Stress hormones cause an immediate rise in blood pressure. While this may not create problems for everyone, chronic stress and hypertension is a deadly combination.

- **Lowered Immunity**—Stress hormones compromise a body's immune system so that it is more susceptible to the flu, colds, and other infectious diseases.
- **Digestive Problems**—Stress has been proven to reduce the amount of beneficial bacteria in the digestive system, which can lead to indigestion, diarrhea, constipation, and other problems.
- **Headaches and Muscle Aches**—What is the most common cause of most headaches and muscle aches? The answer is tension and stress.
- **Changes in Sleep Patterns**—Overstressed people often suffer from insomnia, or feel the need or desire to sleep too much, which can be a sign of depression.
- **Sexual Dysfunction**—Any type of psychological or emotional stress can be the cause of temporary sexual dysfunction in both men and women.
- **Hormonal Imbalances**—During stressful times, the mind sends emergency messages that upset the body's natural hormonal balance.

In addition, there are many stress-induced behaviors that can cause physical harm, such as overeating or eating the wrong foods, alcohol and substance abuse, and smoking.

Help your body beat stress: Exercise.

Whether you like it or not, the best weapon against stress is exercise. Regular exercise—it doesn't matter what it is as long as it's consistent—helps your body deal with stress for a number of reasons:

- Exercise releases hormones that are natural antidepressants and increase your tolerance to pain.
- Exercise stimulates nerves that help the brain's ability to accurately sense emotions. A clear mind can steer clear of misinterpretation and miscommunication, which are high-level stressors.
- Exercise connects to hormones that control the stress response and improves a body's ability to tolerate stress and changes.
- Exercise gets your mind in shape by giving you a positive place to release frustrations and take a break from your worries; it also leaves you with more energy.

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- Exercise can reduce negative thinking and improve your self-image—it changes the way you look and feel.
- Exercise improves cardiovascular health—your heart is a muscle and can be strengthened like any other.

Exercising is a direct hit on stress-induced muscle aches and headaches and helps to normalize sleep patterns and hormonal imbalances. Eat right to fight stress.

Under stress, people physically need more vitamins and minerals, but the foods that have them aren't the ones they grab. Foods rich in fat and calories are what people crave when they're stressed or depressed, and these comfort foods actually work—they do make people feel and function better in the short term. However, they're killers in the long run. These are the kind of foods that, especially when eaten under stress, turn into fat around the middle.

In stressful situations, try to eat foods high in vitamins and fiber: poultry, fish, beans and legumes, low-fat dairy products, whole grains and cereals, and fruits and vegetables. Foods in complex carbohydrates—pasta and potatoes—can help reduce stress because they're more slowly absorbed by the body. Don't skip meals. Getting too hungry will only make you reach for the wrong foods when your blood sugar's low. Avoid caffeine, alcohol, and stimulants in medicines and beverages.

Calm your body and mind.

Other ways to physically take control of stress include these:

- **Breathing Techniques**—Breathing slowly and deeply automatically relaxes the body.
- **Yoga**—Slow exercising such as yoga connects breath, movement, and body control.
- **Meditation**—Find a quiet place to be alone, wherever you are, and try to clear your mind.
- **Relaxation Techniques**—Learn how to really relax, physically and mentally.
- **Stretching**—Take time to stretch whenever you find yourself in a tense position.
- **Walking**—Walk around the building instead of taking a coffee break, or get up 15 minutes early and walk around the block before you leave for work.
- **Sleeping**—Make sure you get just a little more sleep than you think you need during times of high stress.

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