

health notes

Stress: How to reduce and deal with it

Most of us can't avoid stress, but we *can* learn how to deal with it, and perhaps how to alleviate it. Stress is caused by the body's instinct to defend itself. Sometimes this instinct works to our advantage – such as moving out of the way of a speeding car, applying ourselves in order to complete a project on a tight deadline, or forcing us to make difficult decisions. However, if life's daily challenges result in the stress continuing relentlessly, adverse physical and mental symptoms can result. Often, it's not the cause of the stress that needs to be worked on, but how we react to that cause and the things we need to do to deal with it.

Ongoing stress can make you ill

Living with stress can affect both your mental and physical well being. You may find it difficult to concentrate at work, to cope with frustration, and even to control your temper. It can be physically exhausting and you may feel on edge, anxious, afraid, worried, and uptight much of the time. You may also have trouble sleeping and eating. Over the long term, these symptoms can result in ongoing health problems affecting your heart, your nerves, and your body's ability to fight disease.

It's important to speak with your family doctor if you think any of your symptoms may be stress-related. The doctor will first ensure that your symptoms aren't caused by other health problems, and then together you can work on methods of dealing with it.

Signs of stress

- Anxiety
- Back pain
- Trouble sleeping
- Constipation, diarrhea, or upset stomach
- Shortness of breath
- Depression
- Headaches
- Weight gain or loss
- Chest pain

Ways of reducing stress

The first step is to learn to recognize when you're feeling stressed. Early warning signs are tension in your neck and shoulders, clenching your jaw, or clenching your hands into fists. Learning to identify things in your life that are causing stress and then learning how your body reacts to the stress are important to find the most effective way to manage your stress.

One way to deal with the stress is to avoid the event or thing that is causing your stress – but of course this is often not possible. In most cases, the best way to manage stress is to change how you react to it.

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Here are some things you can do to help you avoid, reduce, and deal with stress:

- Don't worry about things that are out of your control
- Take charge over the things you can control
- Set realistic goals
- Prepare as best you can for events you know may be stressful
- Ask for help from friends, family, and professionals
- Work to resolve conflicts with other people
- Plan time for rest, fun, and relaxation

Everyday stress relief

Exercise

Exercise is a terrific stress reliever. Use your pent up energy to run, cycle, lift weights, do yoga or tai chi, or any physical activity that interests you. This will lower your stress level and make you healthier, causing you to feel better overall.

Meditate

Meditation helps to relax you, clears your mind, and allows you to focus on the important things. There are many different meditation methods, so a bit of research will help you find the best form for you.

Sleep and eat properly

Try to get a good night's sleep and eat properly. When our bodies get enough rest during the night, our energy levels increase and we are better able to concentrate on the tasks at hand. As well, nourishing our bodies with a healthy combination of food also increases energy while balancing our metabolism. It is best to avoid caffeine (e.g., coffee, pop).

Deep breathing exercises

Deep breathing exercises can also have a positive effect in reducing your level of stress. Lie on your back on a flat surface, place one hand on your stomach just above your belly button, and place the other hand on your chest. Breathe slowly in through your nose, making your stomach rise just a little. Hold your breath for a second before breathing slowly out through your nose, letting your stomach go back down. Do this for several minutes.

For more help with stress

For help treating symptoms of stress, ask your family doctor for advice or to refer you to a health professional with special training.