

# Stress

## What is stress?

Stress is when life's demands seem too heavy. You feel anxious and tense and may be aware that your heart is beating faster.

A certain amount of stress in our lives is unavoidable and a little may even be good for us. Some people claim they can accomplish more if they have a work deadline. Too much stress, however, is harmful. Your body responds to stressful situations by raising your blood pressure and making your heart work harder. This is particularly dangerous if you already have heart or artery disease or high blood pressure. Stress is more likely to be harmful if you feel helpless to affect the problem or situation.

Your body reacts to stress in other ways, too. Symptoms like back pain, tiredness, headaches, muscle aches, heartburn, upset stomach, shortness of breath, high blood pressure, and weight gain or weight loss are often caused in part by stress. Many office visits to family doctors are for conditions related to stress.

## How does it occur?

Anything you see as a problem can cause stress in you. Different factors may cause stress in other people. Stress can be caused just as easily by everyday matters as by major problems.

## What are the symptoms?

Symptoms may include:

- difficulty sleeping, tiredness, aches, pains, heartburn, indigestion
- change in bowel and bladder habits
- anxiety, tension, depression
- increased use of cigarettes or alcohol.

## How is it diagnosed?

Your health care provider may recognize that stress is an underlying problem from your medical history and symptoms. For example, your blood pressure may be high. However, stress can cause common symptoms, such as headaches or digestive problems, that have many possible causes. For this reason your provider may ask whether your symptoms could be related to stress.

The diagnosis of stress-related illness is not a "rule out" process. That is, the health care provider need not check out every other physical possibility before making the diagnosis of stress-related disease. Your provider may give you a questionnaire to screen for anxiety and stress.

## How is it treated?

Your health care provider will treat any symptoms the underlying stress is causing. He or she may also counsel you or refer you to a psychologist to talk to you about techniques to reduce stress in your life and to cope with stress that you can't avoid. Deep breathing, meditation, stretching your muscles, improving your diet, increasing your exercise, and learning to relax

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can help you manage stress.

## Exercise

Exercise relieves pent-up energy. It also increases fitness, which helps your body cope with stress. Take up a sport, join an exercise group, or walk at least a mile a day. Try to exercise with other people because social contact helps relieve stress, too.

## Relaxation

Relaxation releases muscle tension and calms the mind. Sit comfortably and tighten each muscle in turn for a few seconds, then relax it. Either start with your head and work downward or start at your feet and work upward. Do this every day.

## Other coping strategies

- Have a health checkup. The healthier your body, the better you can deal with stress.
- Follow your provider's advice for reducing and coping with stress in your life.
- Follow your provider's advice for treatment of any stress-related symptoms you have.
- Eat three or four small, nourishing, high-fiber meals a day.
- If you are overweight, talk to your health care provider about weight control.
- Take time for yourself. Set aside time each day especially for exercise or relaxation.
- Take time out for relationships. Sit and talk with family and friends.
- Join an interest group centered on a hobby, sport, or social activity.
- Try to be prepared. Don't put things off and then have to struggle to catch up.
- Simplify your life. Don't try to do too much. Set goals you can achieve. Learn to say "no."
- Be willing to resolve disputes. Don't hold onto anger.
- Share your burdens. Just talking problems through will often resolve them.
- Don't worry about things you can't control.
- Don't roll all your troubles into one large, insoluble one. Break down the difficulties into the smallest parts, then work on the easiest part first. Build on success.

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