



The Stress/Health Connection

Stress is in your mind — but it's also in your stomach, heart, muscles, and even your toes. During stress, your body produces chemicals, including cortisol, an immune-suppressing hormone. The more cortisol, the weaker your immune cells become and the more susceptible you are to illness. Headaches, sleep disorders, backaches, skin rashes, fatigue, irritability, headache, depression, worry, mood swings, chest pain, anxiety, upset stomach, ulcers, and high blood pressure are common reactions to stress. By gaining a better understanding of the stress/health connection, you can reduce your stress and, in turn, improve your health and wellbeing.

Keeping Stress in Check

With Your Mind



- Recognize your stress signals. Once you're aware of your stressors, you'll have a better idea of when you're stressed and can take steps to reduce them.
- Notice when you're most vulnerable to stress and prepare yourself. Are you most affected in the mornings? On Mondays? In the winter?
- Learn to set limits. Don't agree to unnecessary, stressful obligations.
- Take a breather. Stressful situations can make you breathe more shallowly or hold your breath. When you have to relax fast, belly breathing can be done in seconds. To do it: Concentrate on making your abdomen move out as you inhale through your nose, then in as you exhale.

With Your Body



- Exercise. Aerobic workouts — walking, cycling, swimming, or running — can release pent-up frustrations while producing endorphins, brain chemicals that counteract stress.
- Try relaxation techniques. Meditation, creative imagery, visualization, deep-breathing exercises, yoga, and listening to relaxation tapes can help you relax.
- Get enough sleep. Stress interferes with relaxation, making it hard to get a good night's sleep, which can lead to fatigue and a reduced ability to cope. To get the best sleep possible, try to go to bed and wake up at the same time every day.

With Your Fuel



- Eat a healthful diet. A balanced diet can help stabilize your mood.
- Steer clear of caffeine. Caffeine can add to your anxiety, making you feel even more stressed.
- Avoid alcohol and drugs. Using alcohol or other drugs to relieve stress only masks symptoms and can worsen stress in the long run.

With Your Time



- Spend time enjoying your hobbies. Doing so allows you to focus on a pleasurable activity instead of your problems.
- Communicate with friends and family. Social ties relieve stress and contribute to a positive attitude.
- Learn something new. The excitement of learning something new, such as how to speak a different language or play a musical instrument, can make your worries seem far away.

Combating Serious Stress

Face the stressor

Resist any temptation to ignore the stressor. Instead, carefully appraise the seriousness of the problem without magnifying it out of proportion. In addition, confirm your view of the stressor by talking with others. Make a special effort to speak to family, friends, or co-workers who have dealt with similar experiences.

Take inventory of your coping responses

Confidence is a valuable ally in combating stress, and it builds on memories of past successes. Review successes you've had with other stressful life situations. Recall some of the specific things you did to cope.

Take time out to relax

At least once or twice a day, take time to decompress by relaxing — perhaps by listening to soothing music, taking a walk, gardening, reading, or exercising.

Avoid Unnecessary Changes

Reserve what energy you do have for dealing with the stressor at hand. If possible, stabilize your work and home environments while working out the primary problem.