

Stress

What is stress?

Stress is the body's way of responding to any kind of demand. When you feel stressed, your body releases chemicals into the blood. These chemicals give you the energy to fight or to escape. This helps if you are in physical danger. If you have stress caused by something you cannot fight or escape, the chemicals continue to build up. This raises your blood pressure and makes your heart work harder. This kind of stress can affect your physical and mental health. Many office visits to healthcare providers are for conditions related to stress.

What is the cause?

Stress can be caused by both good and bad experiences. Going to school, starting a new job, marrying, raising a family, being promoted, growing old, and facing illness can all be stressful. We all have some stress in our lives, and a little may even be good for us. Some people claim they can get more done if they have a deadline. But too much stress is harmful.

Anything you think is a problem can cause stress for you. Different things cause stress for different people. Stress can be caused by everyday matters as well as by major problems including:

- A change in family or relationships, such as a divorce, death, or birth
- Financial, housing, or work problems
- Abuse
- Natural or man-made disasters

Many stressful events in a short period of time can have a greater effect. Caffeine and some medicines, such as stimulants, can make stress worse.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms may include:

- Back pain, headache, or stomach ache
- Change in appetite, heartburn, or upset stomach
- Change in bowel and bladder habits
- Increased use of cigarettes, alcohol, or drugs
- Irritability
- Low energy
- Muscle tension
- Trouble concentrating or remembering things
- Trouble sleeping and tiredness
- Weight gain or weight loss

How is it diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will ask about your symptoms and examine you. Stress can cause common symptoms, such as headaches or digestive problems, that have many possible causes. Your provider will make sure you do not have a medical illness or drug or alcohol problem that could cause the symptoms.

Your provider may give you a questionnaire to screen for anxiety and stress.

How is it treated?

Therapy

Individual, group, and family therapy may offer support and help reduce fears and worries.

Medicine

Medicine may be prescribed to help reduce symptoms of depression or anxiety and help you cope with stress. Medicine is often used for a short time to help until the stress resolves.

Exercise

Exercise is a great way to relieve stress. Physical activity boosts chemicals in your body, called endorphins, that help you feel good. Focusing on a sport or an exercise routine can also help you forget what is bothering you for a while. Exercise can also relieve muscle tension, help you feel more energetic, and help you sleep better.

Take up a sport, join an exercise group, do yoga, or walk at least a mile a day. You may want to exercise with other people because social contact helps relieve stress, too. Find an activity that you enjoy and that helps you unwind. It won't help if trying to find time for an exercise program makes you feel more stressed!

Relaxation

Relaxation skills take practice to learn. Learning to relax can:

- Help you sleep better
- Take your mind off what is bothering you
- Help with physical symptoms by decreasing heart rate, blood pressure, and muscle tension

Relaxation skills include:

- Deep breathing (focusing on taking slow deep breaths)
- Mental imaging (picturing yourself in a calm place and letting your muscles relax)
- Mindfulness (focusing only on the now, without judging, and not thinking of the past or future)
- Progressive muscle relaxation (tensing and relaxing your body, one muscle group at a time)

How can I take care of myself?

- **Get support.** Talk with family and friends. Just talking problems through will often make you feel better. Surround yourself with people who have a positive attitude.
- **Learn to manage stress.**
 - Know the things that upset you and try to have a positive attitude toward those you cannot avoid. Try not to worry about things you can't control.
 - Do something just for yourself. Getting a new haircut or having a therapeutic massage can do wonders when you're under stress.
 - Try to resolve conflict. Don't hold onto angry feelings.
 - Simplify your life. Check your schedule and to-do list. What must be done? Are there things you can ask someone else to do? What tasks can be dropped?
 - Don't try to do too much. Set goals you can achieve. Learn to say "no."
 - Accept a "good enough" result. Don't demand perfection from yourself or others.
 - Break large tasks into smaller tasks. Plan to do them over several days. Don't put things off and then have to struggle to catch up.
 - Find ways to unwind: take up a hobby, listen to music, watch movies, or take walks.
 - Keep a regular schedule, such as eating meals at the same time every day and going to bed at the same time every night.
- **Take care of your physical health.** Try to get at least 7 to 9 hours of sleep each night. Eat a healthy diet. Limit caffeine. If you smoke, quit. Avoid alcohol and drugs. Exercise according to your healthcare provider's instructions.
- **Check your medicines.** To help prevent problems, tell your healthcare provider and pharmacist about all of the medicines, natural remedies, vitamins, and other supplements that you take. Take your medicines as directed by your provider.
- **Contact your healthcare provider or therapist** if you have any questions or your symptoms seem to be getting worse.

Developed by RelayHealth.

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