

Your Health: How to Lower Your Stress



Stress is a fact of life. While some stress is normal and even needed, too much of it can affect your quality of life and your health.

There are two things you can do about stress:

- You can find ways to lower the amount of stress in your life.
- You can learn how to cope with stress that you cannot avoid.

What are the effects of stress?

Stress can have a serious effect on your health, especially if it lasts for a long time.

- Stress hurts your heart and blood vessels. It can lead to high blood pressure, abnormal heartbeat (arrhythmia), problems with blood clotting, and hardening of the arteries (atherosclerosis). It is also linked to coronary artery disease, heart attack, and heart failure.

- Stress hurts your body's defenses, or immune system. You may be more likely to catch colds, and injuries may take longer to heal. The symptoms of long-term problems may get worse because of stress. These problems include AIDS, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), and asthma.
- Stress can cause you to tighten your muscles, leading to low back or neck pain.
- Stress can make you moody and anxious and make it hard for you to concentrate.
- Over time, stress can lead to depression, relationship problems, and trouble doing a good job at work or school.

What is your stress level?

Ask yourself these questions to learn what is causing your stress and how you respond to it:

1. What job, family, or personal stress do you have?

Long-term stress can be caused by a situation such as:

- Family or relationship problems.
- Caring for a family member who is older, has health problems, or is disabled.
- Trouble at work.
- Having someone close to you who is under stress.

2. Do you have major changes in your life?

Stress is a part of life that we cannot avoid. We all feel stress when we go through life changes, such as getting married, having a baby, or having a child move away from home.

3. How do you cope with stress?

Stress-related wear and tear can come from two sources: the stress itself and the unhealthy habits you use to respond to stress.

Some people respond to stress by smoking, drinking alcohol, or eating poorly. It may feel like these choices help, but really they create even more stress.

These and other lifestyle choices can make it hard for your body to cope with stress. For example, as you sleep, your body recovers from the stresses of the day. If you do not get enough sleep or your sleep gets interrupted, you lose a chance to recover from stress.

Ways to lower your stress

- **Manage your time.** Schedule your commitments, and decide which are most important. Get a planner or calendar and write down what you need to get done each day.
- **Make healthy lifestyle choices.** Get enough rest. Eat healthy foods. Drink little or no alcohol. Get plenty of exercise. Do not smoke or use spit tobacco. If you have trouble quitting tobacco or alcohol, see your doctor.
- **Get support from friends and family.** Ask for help. People who have strong social support are better able to handle life's challenges.
- **Change the way you think.** Learn how to stop thoughts that cause stress.
- **Learn better ways to solve problems and communicate.** Make sure people understand what you are saying. Misunderstandings can cause stressful situations.
- **Talk to an expert.** Stress can be too much to handle on your own. While talking to a friend or family member can be helpful, you may also want to see a health expert such as your doctor or a counselor.

Ways to cope when you cannot avoid stress

- **Get regular exercise.** Aim for at least 2½ hours of activity a week. Any amount can help. Physical activity is one of the best things you can do to manage how you respond to stress.
- **Write.** Keep a journal, or write letters, cards, or e-mails to friends and family members. Research shows that expressing yourself in writing can be a good way to reduce your stress.
- **Express your feelings.** Do not keep your emotions bottled up. Talking, laughing, crying, and expressing anger are normal parts of emotional healing.
- **Do something you enjoy.** Find a hobby or other healthy leisure activity that helps you relax. Volunteer work or other work that helps people can be a powerful stress-buster.
- **Do things that relax your body.** You may want to try muscle relaxation exercises, massage, aromatherapy, yoga, or the traditional Chinese relaxation exercises tai chi and qi gong.
- **Do things to relax your mind.** Listen to relaxing music. Use humor to reduce stress. You can also learn to relax your body through self-hypnosis, meditation, and imagery.

Where can you find out more?

American Institute of Stress: (914) 963-1200, www.stress.org

National Institute of Mental Health: 1-866-615-6464, www.nimh.nih.gov