

How does Stress Affect Your Health?

The human body is designed to experience stress and react to it. Stress can be positive, keeping us alert and ready to avoid danger. Stress becomes negative when a person faces continuous challenges without relief or relaxation between challenges. As a result, the person becomes overworked, and stress-related tension builds.

Stress that continues without relief can lead to a condition called distress -- a negative stress reaction. Distress can disturb the body's internal balance or equilibrium -- leading to physical symptoms including headaches, upset stomach, elevated blood pressure, chest pain, and problems sleeping. Research suggests that stress also can bring on or worsen certain symptoms or diseases.

Stress also becomes harmful when people use alcohol, tobacco, or drugs to try to relieve their stress. Unfortunately, instead of relieving the stress and returning the body to a relaxed state, these substances tend to keep the body in a stressed state and cause more problems.



Health New England *How Can We Help?*SM

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What is Stress?

Stress has been defined as the body's reaction to any change that requires an adjustment or response. The body reacts to these changes with physical, mental, and emotional responses. In most cases, stress is short lived, but when it persists for many days, it can become a problem.

Stress is a normal part of life. Many events that happen to you and around you -- and many things that you do yourself -- put stress on your body. You can experience stress from your environment, your body, and your thoughts.

Chronic Stress Keep in mind that chronic stress can be associated with depression, anxiety disorders and physical problems.

Seek professional help if you have:

- Difficulty sleeping
- Changes in appetite
- Panic attacks
- Muscle tenseness and soreness
- Frequent headaches
- Gastrointestinal problems
- Prolonged feelings of sadness or worthlessness

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The American Institute of Stress

www.stress.org

National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH)

www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/stress

COMMON SYMPTOMS OF STRESS

Chronic stress can wear down the body's natural defenses, leading to a variety of physical symptoms, including the following:

- Dizziness or a general feeling of "being out of it"
- General aches and pains
- Grinding teeth, clenched jaw
- Headaches
- Indigestion
- Increase in or loss of appetite
- Muscle tension in neck, face or shoulders
- Problems sleeping
- Racing heart
- Cold and sweaty palms
- Tiredness, exhaustion
- Trembling/shaking
- Weight gain or loss
- Upset stomach
- Sexual difficulties

TIPS FOR REDUCING STRESS

First try to identify the things in your life that cause you stress: marital problems, conflict at work, a death or illness in the family. Then, try these tips:

- Keep a positive attitude.
- Accept that there are events that you cannot control.
- Be assertive instead of aggressive. "Assert" your feelings, opinions, or beliefs instead of becoming angry, defensive, or passive.
- Learn and practice relaxation techniques.
- Exercise regularly. Your body can fight stress better when it is fit.
- Eat healthy, well-balanced meals.
- Get enough rest and sleep. Your body needs time to recover from stressful events.
- Don't rely on alcohol or drugs to reduce stress.
- Seek out social support.
- Learn to manage your time more effectively.