



Managing Stress

Stress is a feeling of emotional or physical tension. It's your body's reaction to a challenge, demand, or threat. We all experience stress, but not everyone responds to it in the same way.

Common emotions that accompany stress can include frustration, anger, and irritability. Physical symptoms can include sleep disturbances, headaches, muscle tension, upset stomach, and even high blood pressure.

Short-term stress can be good, helping you avoid danger, or meet a deadline. Long-term (chronic) stress, however, can have harmful effects on your health.

The Body's Stress Response

You might be familiar with the term "fight or flight". In response to a real or perceived threat, your body prepares to face the threat (fight) or flee to safety (flight).

This stress response begins in a part of the brain called the amygdala. When the amygdala perceives danger, it sends a distress signal to the hypothalamus; the brain's command center. The hypothalamus signals the nervous system to activate, resulting in a cascade of hormones that cause physiological effects designed to help you stay on high alert. When the threat passes, different hormones are released that bring the body systems back to their pre-stress state.

The problem with chronic stress is that the body systems remain on high alert for prolonged periods of time. This can cause damage to blood vessels and arteries, increased blood pressure, increased risk of heart attack and stroke, increased appetite, buildup of fat tissue, weight gain, diabetes, suppressed immune function, anxiety, depression, and impaired functioning of other body systems.

It's important to identify the stressors in your life so you can learn strategies to cope with them.

Identifying Stressors

You can't begin to manage stress without first identifying your sources of stress. Start by listing situations, concerns, challenges, and even people that trigger your stress response. Examples might include:

External Stressors

- **Positive major life changes:** marriage, buying a new house, having a baby, getting a promotion
- **Negative major life changes:** loss of job, divorce, sickness, death of a loved one
- **Environment:** sudden or continuous noise, odors, temperature, weather conditions, lighting
- **Unpredictable events:** traffic jams, receiving a pay cut, an increase in rent or other expenses
- **Workplace:** an impossible workload, endless emails, urgent deadlines, a demanding boss, rude coworkers
- **Social:** lack of social connections, trying to fit in, meeting new people, strained family relationships

Strategies to manage external stressors include lifestyle factors to boost your resiliency: eating a healthy diet, being physically active, and getting enough sleep are your first lines of defense for helping you cope with stress. Other helpful steps include using humor and practicing problem-solving and time-management skills.

Internal Stressors

- **Fears:** fear of failure, flying, public speaking, etc.
- **Uncertainty and lack of control:** not knowing or not being able to control what might happen
- **Beliefs:** include attitudes, opinions or expectations

Strategies to manage internal stressors include reframing your thoughts, choosing to have a positive mindset, using positive self-talk, and learning relaxation techniques.

If you are feeling overwhelmed by stress, talk to a member of your healthcare team to get help.

