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Stress and Your Health

Q: What is stress?

A: Stress is a feeling you get when faced with a challenge. In small doses, stress can be good for you because it makes you more alert and gives you a burst of energy. For instance, if you start to cross the street and see a car about to run you over, that jolt you feel helps you to jump out of the way before you get hit. But feeling stressed for a long time can take a toll on your mental and physical health. Even though it may seem hard to find ways to de-stress with all the things you have to do, it's important to find those ways. Your health depends on it.

Q: What are the most common causes of stress?

A: Stress happens when people feel like they don't have the tools to manage all of the demands in their lives. Stress can be short-term or long-term. Missing the bus or arguing with your spouse or partner can cause short-term stress. Money problems or trouble at work can cause long-term stress. Even happy events, like having a baby or getting married can cause stress. Some of the most common stressful life events include:

- Death of a spouse
- Death of a close family member
- Divorce
- Losing your job
- Major personal illness or injury
- Marital separation
- Marriage
- Pregnancy



I have two full-time jobs — I'm a customer service center manager and a mom of two young kids. I see myself as a happy person and a hard worker. But last month, the commute to work, my job, the chores around the house, and trying to spend enough time with my kids was really stressing me out. I have to get up really early in the morning to get the kids ready for school. Then it takes me so long to get to work that I'm in a bad mood by the time I get there. My office is short-staffed and we had a lot of deadlines to meet so I was working overtime. My home life suf-

fered — traffic going home didn't help my mood, and when I got there, I was just so tired I didn't want to do anything! But I was faced with making dinner and doing laundry. My kids need my attention too!

I wanted to handle my stress before it got the best of me. I talked with my boss about working later hours so I don't run into so much traffic and am in a better mood when I get there and get home. I asked my husband to pick up the kids from school, and he has offered to help more with dinner and the laundry. When he cooks, I go for a bike ride with my kids. I also started setting five minutes aside in the morning and in the afternoon at work for me to relax and take a deep breath. These small changes have made a big difference in my life!



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- Retirement
- Spending time in jail

Q: What are some common signs of stress?

A: Everyone responds to stress a little differently. Your symptoms may be different from someone else's. Here are some of the signs to look for:

- Not eating or eating too much
- Feeling like you have no control
- Needing to have too much control
- Forgetfulness
- Headaches
- Lack of energy
- Lack of focus
- Trouble getting things done
- Poor self-esteem
- Short temper
- Trouble sleeping
- Upset stomach
- Back pain
- General aches and pains

These symptoms may also be signs of depression or anxiety, which can be caused by long-term stress.

Q: Do women react to stress differently than men?

A: One recent survey found that women were more likely to experience physical symptoms of stress than men. But we don't have enough proof to say that this applies to all women. We do know that women often cope with stress in different ways than men. Women "tend and befriend," taking care of those closest to them, but also drawing support from

friends and family. Men are more likely to have the "fight or flight" response. They cope by "escaping" into a relaxing activity or other distraction.

Q: Can stress affect my health?

A: The body responds to stress by releasing stress hormones. These hormones make blood pressure, heart rate, and blood sugar levels go up. Long-term stress can help cause a variety of health problems, including:

- Mental health disorders, like depression and anxiety
- Obesity
- Heart disease
- High blood pressure
- Abnormal heart beats
- Menstrual problems
- Acne and other skin problems

Q: Does stress cause ulcers?

A: No, stress doesn't cause ulcers, but it can make them worse. Most ulcers are caused by a germ called *H. pylori*. Researchers think people might get it through food or water. Most ulcers can be cured by taking a combination of antibiotics and other drugs.

Q: What is post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)?

A: Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a type of anxiety disorder that can occur after living through or seeing a dangerous event. It can also occur after a sudden traumatic event. This can include:

- Being a victim of or seeing violence
- Being a victim of sexual or physical abuse or assault



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- The death or serious illness of a loved one
- Fighting in a war
- A severe car crash or a plane crash
- Hurricanes, tornadoes, and fires

You can start having PTSD symptoms right after the event. Or symptoms can develop months or even years later.

Symptoms may include:

- Nightmares
- Flashbacks, or feeling like the event is happening again
- Staying away from places and things that remind you of what happened
- Being irritable, angry, or jumpy
- Feeling strong guilt, depression, or worry
- Trouble sleeping
- Feeling “numb”
- Having trouble remembering the event

Women are 2 to 3 times more likely to develop PTSD than men. Also, people with ongoing stress in their lives are more likely to develop PTSD after a dangerous event.

Q: How can I help handle my stress?

A: Everyone has to deal with stress. There are steps you can take to help you handle stress in a positive way and keep it from making you sick. Try these tips to keep stress in check:

Develop a new attitude

- **Become a problem solver.** Make a list of the things that cause you stress. From your list, figure out which problems you can solve now

and which are beyond your control for the moment. From your list of problems that you can solve now, start with the little ones. Learn how to calmly look at a problem, think of possible solutions, and take action to solve the problem. Being able to solve small problems will give you confidence to tackle the big ones. And feeling confident that you can solve problems will go a long way to helping you feel less stressed.

- **Be flexible.** Sometimes, it's not worth the stress to argue. Give in once in awhile or meet people half-way.
- **Get organized.** Think ahead about how you're going to spend your time. Write a to-do list. Figure out what's most important to do and do those things first.
- **Set limits.** When it comes to things like work and family, figure out what you can really do. There are only so many hours in the day. Set limits for yourself and others. Don't be afraid to say NO to requests for your time and energy.

Relax

- **Take deep breaths.** If you're feeling stressed, taking a few deep breaths makes you breathe slower and helps your muscles relax.
- **Stretch.** Stretching can also help relax your muscles and make you feel less tense.
- **Massage tense muscles.** Having someone massage the muscles in the back of your neck and upper back can help you feel less tense.
- **Take time to do something you want to do.** We all have lots of



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things that we have to do. But often we don't take the time to do the things that we really want to do. It could be listening to music, reading a good book, or going to a movie. Think of this as an order from your doctor, so you won't feel guilty!

Take care of your body

- **Get enough sleep.** Getting enough sleep helps you recover from the stresses of the day. Also, being well-rested helps you think better so that you are prepared to handle problems as they come up. Most adults need 7 to 9 hours of sleep a night to feel rested.
- **Eat right.** Try to fuel up with fruits, vegetables, beans, and whole grains. Don't be fooled by the jolt you get from caffeine or high-sugar snack foods. Your energy will wear off, and you could wind up feeling more tired than you did before.
- **Get moving.** Getting physical activity can not only help relax your tense muscles but improve your mood. Research shows that physical activity can help relieve symptoms of depression and anxiety.

- **Don't deal with stress in unhealthy ways.** This includes drinking too much alcohol, using drugs, smoking, or overeating.

Connect with others

- **Share your stress.** Talking about your problems with friends or family members can sometimes help you feel better. They might also help you see your problems in a new way and suggest solutions that you hadn't thought of.
- **Get help from a professional if you need it.** If you feel that you can no longer cope, talk to your doctor. She or he may suggest counseling to help you learn better ways to deal with stress. Your doctor may also prescribe medicines, such as antidepressants or sleep aids.
- **Help others.** Volunteering in your community can help you make new friends and feel better about yourself. ■



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For more information

For more information on stress and your health, please call womenshealth.gov at 1-800-994-9662 or contact the following organizations:

National Institute of Mental Health

Phone: (301) 443-4513; Toll-Free: (866) 615-6464

Internet Address: <http://www.nimh.nih.gov>

American Psychiatric Association

Phone: (703) 907-7300; Toll-Free: 1-888-35-PSYCH (77924)

Internet Address: <http://www.psych.org>

National Mental Health Consumers' Self-Help Clearinghouse

Phone: (215) 751-1810; Toll-Free: (800) 553-4539

Internet Address: <http://www.mhselfhelp.org>

American Psychological Association

Phone: (202) 336-5500; Toll-Free: (800) 374-2721

Internet Address: <http://www.apa.org>

National Mental Health Information Center

Phone: (800) 789-2647

Internet Address: <http://www.mental-health.org>

National Center for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

Phone: (802) 296-6300

Internet Address: <http://ncptsd.va.gov/ncmain/>

American Institute of Stress

Phone: (914) 963-1200

Internet Address: <http://www.stress.org>

Mental Health America

Phone: (800) 969-6642

Internet Address: <http://www.nmha.org>

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