



Understanding Stress

Did You Know?

Healthy eating can make you better able to manage stress when it arises or less vulnerable to the effects of stress.

- Eat a diet rich in plant based foods.
 - Fruits
 - Vegetables
 - Grains
 - Nuts and Seeds
- Eat a variety of foods.
- Avoid fast food, junk food, and highly processed foods.
- Eat a diet low in sugar, sodium, and fat.
- Stay hydrated.

What is stress?

Stress is the body's physical response to being challenged or threatened. Small amounts of stress such as competing in a sporting event or working on a school project can increase productivity. Yet, too much stress can overwhelm our coping abilities, decrease performance, and lower our overall health.

Short-Term Stress

The *fight-or-flight* response is a commonly known bodily reaction to a perceived demand or threat. In human history, a person faced with danger had two options to survive: either to attack the threat (fight) or run away (flight).

The physical symptoms felt during *fight or flight* are similar to those experienced with short-term stress, including increases in heart rate, breathing rate, muscle tension, blood pressure, and insulin secretion. Hormones secreted during short-term stress force all bodily efforts to go toward fighting against the source of stress.

Long-Term Stress

When stress hormones stay in our systems for too long, efforts that were previously meant for good, can actually harm our bodies. With constant stressors in our lives such as work deadlines, relationship issues, and school demands, our bodies can stay in this *fight or flight* state longer than they should, leading to long-term stress.

Long-term, or chronic, stress can contribute an array of health problems, including obesity, heart disease, cancer, and immune system problems. Additionally, people suffering from chronic stress are at greater risk for mental health, sleep, and sexual problems and are more likely use and abuse tobacco, alcohol or other drugs.



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Common Causes and Triggers of Stress

	Examples
Physical Environment	bright lights, loud noises, extreme heat or cold, bad weather, traffic
Social and Relational	aggressiveness in others, loneliness, lack of social support, conflict
Financial	taxes, bills, unplanned expenses, increases in financial obligations
Organizational	school or work deadlines, completing a big task/project/test, school or work culture
Live Events	death of loved one, loss of job, work promotion, marriage, birth of child
Lifestyle Choices	lack of sleep, poor time management, poor nutrition, increased drinking
Physiological	poor health, physical illness, pregnancy, injury

Recognizing the Signs of Chronic Stress

Knowing the signs may help you identify chronic stress before it becomes too much for you or a loved one to handle.

Physical

- Increased heart rate
- Chest pains
- Muscle aches and stiffness
- High blood pressure
- Headaches
- Indigestion
- Weight gain or loss
- Fatigue
- Frequent colds or flu
- Worsening of existing illness

Behavioral

- Increased smoking or drinking
- Changes in eating habits
- Changes in sleeping habits
- Nervousness such as nail biting, fidgeting, etc.
- Yelling and swearing
- Increased aggression

Mental/Emotional

- Decreased memory
- Difficulty making decisions
- Inattentiveness
- Loss of sense of humor
- Blank or racing mind
- Anxiety and worry
- Irritability and anger

Everyone has stress to deal with from time to time, but better understanding your personal triggers and the signs of stress can help you handle it in a more positive way.