

Stress and your health

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/hlv-20049495>

Chronic stress puts your health at risk

Chronic stress can wreak havoc on your mind and body. Take steps to control your stress.

Your body is made to react to stress in ways meant to protect you against threats from predators and other aggressors. Such threats are rare today. But that doesn't mean that life is free of stress.

Instead, you likely face many demands each day. For example, you may take on a huge workload, pay bills or take care of your family. Your body treats these everyday tasks as threats. Because of this, you may feel as if you're always under attack. But you can fight back. You don't have to let stress control your life.

Understanding the natural stress response

When you face a perceived threat, a tiny region at the brain's base, called the hypothalamus, sets off an alarm system in the body. An example of a perceived threat is a large dog barking at you during your morning walk. Through nerve and hormonal signals, this system prompts the adrenal glands, found atop the kidneys, to release a surge of hormones, such as adrenaline and cortisol.

Adrenaline makes the heart beat faster, causes blood pressure to go up and gives you more energy. Cortisol, the primary stress hormone, increases sugar, also called glucose, in the bloodstream, enhances the brain's use of glucose and increases the availability of substances in the body that repair tissues.

Cortisol also slows functions that would be nonessential or harmful in a fight-or-flight situation. It changes immune system responses and suppresses the digestive system, the reproductive system and growth processes. This complex natural alarm system also communicates with the brain regions that control mood, motivation and fear.

When the natural stress response goes wild

The body's stress response system is usually self-limiting. Once a perceived threat has passed, hormones return to typical levels. As adrenaline and cortisol levels drop, your heart rate and blood pressure return to typical levels. Other systems go back to their regular activities.

But when stressors are always present and you always feel under attack, that fight-or-flight reaction stays turned on.

The long-term activation of the stress response system and too much exposure to cortisol and other stress hormones can disrupt almost all the body's processes. This puts you at higher risk of many health problems, including:

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Digestive problems

- Headaches
- Muscle tension and pain
- Heart disease, heart attack, high blood pressure and stroke
- Sleep problems
- Weight gain
- Problems with memory and focus

That's why it's so important to learn healthy ways to cope with your life stressors.

Why you react to life stressors the way you do

Your reaction to a potentially stressful event is different from everyone else's. How you react to your life stressors is affected by such factors as:

- Genetics. The genes that control the stress response keep most people at a fairly steady emotional level, only sometimes priming the body for fight or flight. More active or less active stress responses may stem from slight differences in these genes.
- Life experiences. Strong stress reactions sometimes can be traced to traumatic events. People who were neglected or abused as children tend to be especially at risk of experiencing high stress. The same is true of airplane crash survivors, people in the military, police officers and firefighters, and people who have experienced violent crime.

You may have some friends who seem relaxed about almost everything. And you may have other friends who react strongly to the slightest stress. Most people react to life stressors somewhere between those extremes.

Learning to react to stress in a healthy way

Stressful events are facts of life. And you may not be able to change your current situation. But you can take steps to manage the impact these events have on you.

You can learn to identify what causes you stress. And you can learn how to take care of yourself physically and emotionally in the face of stressful situations.

Try these stress management tips:

- Eat a healthy diet and get regular exercise. Get plenty of sleep too.
- Do relaxation exercises such as yoga, deep breathing, massage or meditation.
- Keep a journal. Write about your thoughts or what you're grateful for in your life.

- Take time for hobbies, such as reading or listening to music. Or watch your favorite show or movie.
- Foster healthy friendships and talk with friends and family.
- Have a sense of humor. Find ways to include humor and laughter in your life, such as watching funny movies or looking at joke websites.
- Volunteer in your community.
- Organize and focus on what you need to get done at home and work and remove tasks that aren't needed.
- Seek professional counseling. A counselor can help you learn specific coping skills to manage stress.
- Stay away from unhealthy ways of managing your stress, such as using alcohol, tobacco, drugs or excess food. If you're worried that your use of these products has gone up or changed due to stress, talk to your health care provider.

There are many rewards for learning to manage stress. For example, you can have peace of mind, fewer stressors and less anxiety, a better quality of life, improvement in conditions such as high blood pressure, better self-control and focus, and better relationships. And it might even lead to a longer, healthier life.