

Care at Cleveland Clinic

Overview

What is stress?

Stress is a natural human reaction that happens to everyone. In fact, your body is designed to experience stress and react to it. When you experience changes or challenges (stressors), [your body produces physical and mental responses](#). That's stress.

Stress responses help your body adjust to new situations. Stress can be positive — keeping you alert, motivated and ready to avoid danger. For example, if you have an important test coming up, a stress response might help your body work harder and stay awake longer. But stress becomes a problem when stressors continue without relief or periods of relaxation.

Types of stress

There are three main kinds of stress: acute, episodic acute and chronic.

Acute stress: Acute stress is short-term stress that comes and goes quickly. It can be positive or negative. It's the feeling you get when you're riding on a rollercoaster or having a fight with your boyfriend. Everyone experiences acute stress from time to time.

Episodic acute stress: Episodic acute stress is when you experience acute stress on a regular basis. With this kind of stress, you don't ever get the time you need to return to a calm, relaxed state. Episodic stress frequently affects people working in certain professions, like healthcare providers.

Chronic stress: Chronic stress is long-term stress that goes on for weeks or months. You may experience chronic stress due to marriage troubles, issues at work or financial problems. It's important to find ways to [manage chronic stress](#) because it can lead to health issues.

Symptoms and Causes

Stress can cause physical, psychological or behavioral symptoms.

How does stress affect the body?

Your body's [autonomic nervous system](#) controls your heart rate, breathing, vision changes and more. Its built-in stress response — the “[fight-or-flight response](#)” — helps your body face stressful situations.

When you have long-term (chronic) stress, continued activation of the stress response causes wear and tear on your body. You may develop stress symptoms that are physical, psychological or behavioral.

Physical symptoms

Physical symptoms of stress may include:

Aches and pains.

[Chest pain](#) or a feeling like your heart is racing.

Exhaustion or trouble sleeping.

[Headaches](#), [dizziness](#) or shaking.

[High blood pressure \(hypertension\)](#).

Muscle tension or jaw clenching.

Stomach or digestive problems.

Trouble having sex.

[Weakened immune system.](#)

Psychological symptoms

Stress can lead to emotional and mental (psychological) symptoms, like:

[Anxiety](#) or irritability.

[Depression.](#)

[Panic attacks.](#)

Sadness.

Behavioral symptoms

Often, people with chronic stress try different things to cope. And some of those things are habit-forming and can have an impact on your health. These may include:

[Alcohol use disorder.](#)

[Gambling disorder.](#)

[Overeating](#) or developing an [eating disorder.](#)

[Participating compulsively in sex,](#) shopping or internet browsing.

[Smoking.](#)

[Substance use disorder.](#)

Stress rash

[Stress rashes](#) often appear as pink or discolored, raised bumps called [hives](#). Hives are welts that can develop and swell on the surface of your skin. They can itch, burn and even hurt. Hives are usually an allergic reaction to something, like certain kinds of foods, fabrics or chemicals. But sometimes, stress can trigger an outbreak.

Stress rashes are more common in women and people [assigned female at birth \(AFAB\)](#) than men and people assigned male at birth (AMAB), and they affect people in their 20s, 30s and 40s most often. But they can also affect anyone. Like other kinds of hives, you can try treating them with an [antihistamine](#). But it's also important to manage your stress.

What causes stress?

Stress is how your body reacts to a change or challenge, and many different things can lead to it. Stressors can also be positive or negative. For instance, getting a new job or losing a job can both cause stress. Other causes of stress include:

- An illness or death of a loved one.

- Marriage, separation or divorce.

- Financial issues.

- Moving to a new house.

- Going on vacation.

- Having a baby.

- Retiring.

Stress can also be acute, meaning short term. Causes of acute stress may include everyday stressors, like:

- Studying for a big test.

- Getting ready for a work presentation.

Having an argument with a friend or loved one.

Needing to get a lot completed in a short amount of time.

Experiencing many small problems all at once, like getting in a traffic jam, spilling coffee all over yourself and running late.

What are the complications of stress?

Chronic stress can lead to many long-term health issues affecting your:

[Immune system](#) (like arthritis, fibromyalgia and psoriasis).

[Digestive system](#) (like weight gain or loss, ulcers and irritable bowel syndrome).

[Cardiovascular system](#) (like high blood pressure, increased heart rate and heart palpitations).

[Reproductive system](#) (like infections, polycystic ovarian syndrome and infertility).

Stress can also put you at a higher risk of developing a mental health condition, like depression or anxiety. **If you're feeling severely stressed and/or thinking about hurting yourself, call or text 988 to reach the [988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline](#).**

How is stress diagnosed?

Stress is subjective — not measurable with tests. Only the person experiencing it can determine whether it's present and how severe it feels. A healthcare provider may use questionnaires to understand your stress and how it affects your life.

If you have chronic stress, your healthcare provider can evaluate symptoms that result from stress. For example, they can diagnose and treat high blood pressure.

Management and Treatment

How can I relieve stress?

You can't avoid stress. But you can stop it from becoming overwhelming by practicing some daily [stress relief strategies](#):

Stress management starts with feeling good physically. Try getting some form of physical activity when you feel symptoms of stress coming on. Even a short walk can [boost your mood](#).

At the end of each day, take a moment to think about what you've accomplished — not what you didn't get done.

Set goals for your day, week and month. Narrowing your view can help you feel more in control of the moment and long-term tasks.

Consider talking to a therapist or a healthcare provider about your worries.

Prevention

How can I prevent or reduce stress?

Many daily strategies can help you keep stress at bay:

Try relaxation activities, like [meditation](#), yoga, [tai chi](#), breathing exercises and muscle relaxation.

Programs are available online, in smartphone apps, and at many gyms and community centers.

Take good care of your body each day. Eating right, participating in physical activity and getting enough [sleep](#) can help your body handle stress much better.

Stay positive and [practice gratitude](#), acknowledging the good parts of your day or life.

Accept that you can't control everything. Find ways to let go of worry about situations you can't change.

Learn to [say "no"](#) to additional responsibilities when you're too busy or stressed.

Stay connected with people who keep you calm, make you happy, provide emotional support and help you with practical things. A friend, family member or neighbor can become a good listener or share responsibilities so stress doesn't become overwhelming.

Outlook / Prognosis

How long does stress last?

Stress can be a short-term issue or a long-term problem, depending on what changes in your life. Regularly using stress management techniques can help you avoid most physical, emotional and behavioral symptoms of stress.

Living With

When should I talk to a healthcare provider about stress?

You should seek medical attention if:

You feel overwhelmed.

Your physical health is affected.

Symptoms of stress aren't going away with stress relief techniques.

You're using recreational drugs or alcohol to cope.

Your primary care provider can help by offering advice, prescribing medicine or referring you to a mental health professional, like a [psychologist](#) or [psychiatrist](#).

When should I seek emergency help?

If you're thinking about hurting yourself or you're in immediate distress, **call or text 988 to reach the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline**. This service provides 24-hour, confidential support to anyone in the United States experiencing emotional distress or a suicidal crisis.

What questions should I ask my healthcare provider?

Questions you may want to ask your provider include:

What symptoms of stress should I be concerned about?

How can I manage my stress better?

What stress management techniques do you think I should try?

Do you have a therapist or support group you'd recommend?

A note from Cleveland Clinic

It's natural to have stress sometimes. You slept in, your shirt's wrinkly and you're going to be late for that job interview — now, you feel stressed. But long-term stress can cause physical, emotional and behavioral symptoms. It's important to get control over your chronic stress because it can lead to other health issues. If symptoms of stress aren't going away with stress relief techniques and if you're feeling overwhelmed, talk to a healthcare provider.