

STRESS AND HEALTH:

Everyone experiences stress to some degree. The way you respond to stress, however, makes a big difference to your overall well-being.

Sometimes, the best way to manage your stress involves changing your situation. At other times, the best strategy involves changing the way you respond to the situation.

Developing a clear understanding of how stress impacts your physical and mental health is important. It's also important to recognize how your mental and physical health affects your stress level.

Types of Stress

Stress can be defined as any type of change that causes physical, emotional or psychological strain. However, not all types of stress are harmful or even negative. Here are the different types of stress:

- **Eustress:** This type of stress is fun and exciting. It's known as a positive type of stress that can keep you energized. It's associated with surges of adrenaline, such as when you are skiing or racing to meet a deadline.
- **Acute stress:** A very short-term type of stress that can either be positive or more distressing. This is the type of stress we most often encounter in day-to-day life.
- **Episodic acute stress:** Acute stress that seems to run rampant and be a way of life, creating a life of relative chaos.
- **Chronic stress:** Stress that seems never-ending and inescapable, like the stress of a bad marriage or an extremely taxing job. Chronic stress can also stem from traumatic experiences and childhood trauma.

How Your Body Responds

Stress can trigger the body's response to a perceived threat or danger, known as the fight-or-flight response.

During this reaction, certain hormones like adrenaline and cortisol are released. This speeds the heart rate, slows digestion, shunts blood flow to major muscle groups, and changes various other autonomic nervous functions, giving the body a burst of energy and strength.

Originally named for its ability to enable us to physically fight or run away when faced with danger, it's now activated in situations where neither response is appropriate—like in traffic or during a stressful day at work.

When the perceived threat is gone, systems are designed to return to normal function via the relaxation response. But in cases of chronic stress, the relaxation responses doesn't occur

often enough, and being in a near-constant state of fight-or-flight can cause damage to the body.

Stress can also lead to some unhealthy habits that have a negative impact on your health. For example, many people cope with stress by eating too much or by smoking. These unhealthy habits damage the body and create bigger problems in the long-term.

10 Health Problems Related to Stress

- **Heart disease.** Researchers have long suspected that the stressed-out, type A personality has a higher risk of high blood pressure and heart problems. We don't know why, exactly. Stress can directly increase heart rate and blood flow, and causes the release of cholesterol and triglycerides into the blood stream. It's also possible that stress is related to other problems -- an increased likelihood of smoking or obesity -- that indirectly increase the heart risks.

Doctors do know that sudden emotional stress can be a trigger for serious cardiac problems, including heart attacks. People who have chronic heart problems need to avoid acute stress -- and learn how to successfully manage life's unavoidable stresses -- as much as they can.

- **Asthma.** Many studies have shown that stress can worsen asthma. Some evidence suggests that a parent's chronic stress might even increase the risk of developing asthma in their children. One study looked at how parental stress affected the asthma rates of young children who were also exposed to air pollution or whose mothers smoked during pregnancy. The kids with stressed out parents had a substantially higher risk of developing asthma.
- **Obesity.** Excess fat in the belly seems to pose greater health risks than fat on the legs or hips -- and unfortunately, that's just where people with high stress seem to store it. "Stress causes higher levels of the hormone cortisol," says Winner, "and that seems to increase the amount of fat that's deposited in the abdomen."
- **Diabetes.** Stress can worsen diabetes in two ways. First, it increases the likelihood of bad behaviors, such as unhealthy eating and

excessive drinking. Second, stress seems to raise the glucose levels of people with type 2 diabetes directly.

- **Headaches.** Stress is considered one of the most common triggers for headaches -- not just tension headaches, but migraines as well.
- **Depression and anxiety.** It's probably no surprise that chronic stress is connected with higher rates of depression and anxiety. One survey of recent studies found that people who had stress related to their jobs -- like demanding work with few rewards -- had an 80% higher risk of developing depression within a few years than people with lower stress.
- **Gastrointestinal problems.** Here's one thing that stress doesn't do - - it doesn't cause ulcers. However, it can make them worse. Stress is also a common factor in many other GI conditions, such as chronic heartburn (or gastroesophageal reflux disease, GERD) and irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), Winner says.
- **Alzheimer's disease.** One animal study found that stress might worsen Alzheimer's disease, causing its brain lesions to form more quickly. Some researchers speculate that reducing stress has the potential to slow down the progression of the disease.
- **Accelerated aging.** There's actually evidence that stress can affect how you age. One study compared the DNA of mothers who were under high stress -- they were caring for a chronically ill child -- with women who were not. Researchers found that a particular region of the chromosomes showed the effects of accelerated aging. Stress seemed to accelerate aging about 9 to 17 additional years.
- **Premature death.** A study looked at the health effects of stress by studying elderly caregivers looking after their spouses -- people who are naturally under a great deal of stress. It found that caregivers had a 63% higher rate of death than people their age who were not caregivers.

SOURCE: www.webmd.com

Health Psychology By Shelly E. Taylor, 4th edition.