

Stress: Constant stress puts your health at risk

Your body's stress reaction was meant to protect you. But when it's constantly on alert, your health can pay the price. Take steps to control your stress.

Your body is hard-wired 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.

On the contrary, you undoubtedly face multiple demands each day, such as shouldering a huge workload, making ends meet, taking care of your family, or just making it through the morning rush hour. Your body treats these so-called minor hassles as threats. As a result you may feel as if you're constantly under assault. But you can fight back. You don't have to let stress control your life.

Understanding the natural stress response

If your mind and body are constantly on edge because of excessive stress in your life, you may face serious health problems. That's because your body's "fight-or-flight reaction" — its natural alarm system — is constantly on.

When you encounter perceived threats — a large dog barks at you during your morning walk, for instance — your hypothalamus, a tiny region at the base of your brain, sets off an alarm system in your body. Through a combination of nerve and hormonal signals, this system prompts your adrenal glands, located atop your kidneys, to release a surge of hormones, including adrenaline and cortisol.

Adrenaline increases your heart rate, elevates your blood pressure and boosts energy supplies. Cortisol, the primary stress hormone, increases sugars (glucose) in the bloodstream, enhances your brain's use of glucose and increases the availability of substances that repair tissues.

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

When the natural stress response goes haywire

The body's stress-response system is usually self-regulating. It decreases hormone levels and enables your body to return to normal once a perceived threat has passed. As adrenaline and cortisol levels drop, your heart rate and blood pressure return to baseline levels, and other systems resume their regular activities.

But when the stressors of your life are always present, leaving you constantly feeling stressed, tense, nervous or on edge, that fight-or-flight reaction stays turned on. The less control you have over potentially stress-inducing events and the more uncertainty they create, the more likely you are to feel stressed. Even the typical day-to-day demands of living can contribute to your body's stress response.

The long-term activation of the stress-response system — and the subsequent overexposure to cortisol and other stress hormones — can disrupt almost all your body's processes. This puts you at increased risk of numerous health problems, including:

- Heart disease
- Sleep problems
- Digestive problems
- Depression
- Obesity
- Memory impairment
- Worsening of skin conditions, such as eczema

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

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Why you react to life stressors the way you do

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

- **Genetics.** The genes that control the stress response keep most people on a fairly even keel, only occasionally priming the body for fight or flight. Overactive or underactive stress responses may stem from slight differences in these genes.
- **Life experiences.** Strong stress reactions sometimes can be traced to early environmental factors. People who were exposed to extremely stressful events as children, such as neglect or abuse, tend to be particularly vulnerable to stress as adults.

You may have some friends who seem laid-back about almost everything and others who react strongly at the slightest stress. Most reactions to life stressors fall somewhere between those extremes.

Learning to react to life stressors in a healthy way

Stressful events are a fact 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 stresses you out, how to take control of some stress-inducing circumstances, and how to take care of yourself physically and emotionally in the face of stressful situations.

Stress management strategies include:

- Eating a healthy diet and getting regular exercise and plenty of sleep
- Practicing relaxation techniques
- Fostering healthy friendships
- Having a sense of humor
- Seeking professional counseling when needed

The payoff of managing stress is peace of mind and — perhaps — a longer, healthier life.

Source: www.mayoclinic.com