

HOW STRESS AFFECTS YOUR HEALTH

Stress: We've all felt it. Sometimes stress can be a positive force, motivating you to perform well at your piano recital or job interview. But often — like when you're stuck in traffic — it's a negative force. If you experience stress over a prolonged period of time, it could become chronic — unless you take action.

A natural reaction

Have you ever found yourself with sweaty hands on a first date or felt your heart pound during a scary movie? Then you know you can feel stress in both your mind and body. You confront multiple challenges every day, such as meeting deadlines, paying bills and juggling childcare that make your body react. As a result, your body's natural alarm system — the "fight or flight" response — may be stuck in the on position. And that can have serious consequences for your health.

What you can do

Reducing your stress levels can not only make you feel better right now, but may also protect your health long-term. Strategies for reducing stress include:

- **Identify what's causing stress.** Monitor your state of mind throughout the day. If you feel stressed, write down the cause, your thoughts and your mood. Once you know what's bothering you, develop a plan for addressing it. That might mean setting more reasonable expectations for yourself and others or asking for help with household responsibilities, job assignments or other tasks. List all your commitments, assess your priorities and then eliminate any tasks that are not absolutely essential.
- **Build strong relationships.** Relationships can be a source of stress. Research has found that negative, hostile reactions with your spouse cause immediate changes in stress-sensitive hormones, for example. But relationships can also serve as stress buffers. Reach out to family members or close friends and let them know you're having a tough time. They may be able to offer practical assistance and support, useful ideas or just a fresh perspective as you begin to tackle whatever's causing your stress.
- **Walk away when you're angry.** Before you react, take time to regroup by counting to 10. Then reconsider. Walking or other physical activities can also help you work off steam. Plus, exercise increases the production of endorphins, your body's natural mood-booster. Commit to a daily walk or other form of exercise — a small step that can make a big difference in reducing stress levels.
- **Rest your mind.** Stress keeps more than 40 percent of adults lying awake at night. To help ensure you get the recommended seven or eight hours of shut-eye, cut back on caffeine, remove distractions such as television or computers from your bedroom and go to bed at the same time each night. Research shows that activities like yoga and relaxation exercises not only help reduce stress, but also boost immune functioning.
- **Get help.** If you continue to feel overwhelmed, consult with a provider who can help you or connect you with someone who can help you learn how to manage stress effectively. He or she can help you identify situations or behaviors that contribute to your chronic stress and then develop an action plan for changing them.

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