

## Stress: I Know I Have It But What Is It?



You feel it when you have it, but you don't always know it is stress. Your doctor will ask you questions about what's stressing you when you show up with chronic conditions such as high blood pressure, too many colds, ulcers, fatigue, insomnia, headaches, and a whole host of other physical ailments. Or, you may realize that you are irritable or anxious or depressed, and those symptoms also may take you in to see the doctor. Stress can be a major contributing factor in just about every physical and mental ailment.

Most people think of stress as being the problems in life and will list a mother-in-law, a car accident, a poor grade, or a lost job as stress. These are actually the stressors. They cause the stress but aren't the stress. Some are short-lived, like finding a flat tire Monday morning as you make your dash to work. You are pretty much over it by the time you've fixed the tire and gone on your way. Others take longer to process, such as the death of a family member or the birth of a baby. Your life is full of stressors because life is full of change, so the potential causes of stress are numerous.

Stress is your reaction to the stressors in your life. Your body and mind react to stress in a variety of ways, and it is important to know this reaction can be highly individual. Although there are major life stressors, such as a serious disaster, to which most people react similarly, each person's reaction to the same event might be quite different. For example, your son is a race car driver and being in the race is pleasant for him. You, as his parent, find it hard to watch him drive because it's dangerous! Your son is experiencing pleasant stress, also called "eustress." You are experiencing unpleasant stress, called "distress." There are varying degrees of both. It is quite possible that same event can trigger distress in one individual and eustress in another. It has a lot to do with your past experiences, your personal circumstances, and your perception of the stressor.

Your body will respond to a sudden significant stressor with what is known as the "fight-or-flight response." This is a complex process of biological change that actually prepares you for emergency action. There are three stages: alarm, resistance, and exhaustion. To illustrate: as you drive to work, a car runs a red light and crosses right in front of your car. Your body may respond in the alarm stage with a tightening of the leg and arm muscles, instant perspiration and flushing to the face, and a sinking feeling in the stomach. If there is no collision, your body will eventually return to its usual state of functioning. However, if you continue on your way in rush hour traffic with repeated close calls, your body may not have time to "repair." This is the resistance stage. You may notice a continued sense of anxiety or rapid heart beat or shallow breathing. Once you get to work, you may need a few minutes of quiet activity to recover. If you don't get that and your day continues to be chaotic, your body may not recover and will go into the third stage, exhaustion. At this stage, the body's resources are depleted and heart rate, respiration, perspiration, and other elevated symptoms will continue, just as they would if you had physically exerted yourself. Given enough quiet time, your body eventually can return to its normal state of balance.

If you continue to experience rapidly changing events day after day, you will become accustomed to the exhaustion stage as "normal" for you. However, your mind and body will continue to draw on reserves of energy that would have been used for daily functioning, and these reserves are not limitless. Continued stress will begin to show in physical and mental problems.

## Stress: I Know I Have It But What Is It?, cont.

A gradual accumulation of moderate or mild stressors also can bring your body to a similar state. You are carrying a load of accumulated stress and wonder why you feel so bad when it has been months since your car accident or surgery or job loss. These kinds of events are long-term or major stressors. Adjustment to these may take a year or more. Several ongoing stressful situations add up to a lot of demands on the body and mind. An ongoing awareness of what is going on in your life is key to understanding what is happening to you and critical in helping you cope with stress. If you are experiencing more than two or three of the following symptoms, you may be susceptible to a stress-related mental or physical illness. Consult a health professional or learn some stress management skills.



### Some Warning Signs of Unresolved Stress

#### Ongoing Physical Symptoms

- Headaches
- Weight change
- Rapid heartbeats or palpitations
- Frequent colds
- Changes in sleep patterns
- Nausea, diarrhea, indigestion
- Tense or sore muscles
- Increased alcohol, drug or tobacco use
- Fatigue
- Tension or restlessness
- Trembling
- Weakness or dizziness
- Abnormal sweating
- Urinary frequency

#### Ongoing Psychological Symptoms

- Forgetfulness
- Poor concentration or productivity
- Negative attitude
- Worry
- Confused or disorganized thinking
- Anxiety
- Sadness
- Irritability or outbursts of anger
- Mood swings
- Nightmares
- Crying spells
- Loneliness or withdrawal from others
- Chronic use of TV, books or hobbies to escape

For more information on adult stress, please visit:

<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/stress.html>

[http://www.helpguide.org/mental/stress\\_signs.htm](http://www.helpguide.org/mental/stress_signs.htm)