

Understanding Stress: Signs, Symptoms, Causes, and Effects, cont.

What Is Stress?

Stress is a psychological and physiological response to changing events. Stress is an everyday event that can have positive and negative effects on the body. The body's response to stress involves a "fight or flight" response in which biological changes prepare the body for emergency action.

When "danger" is sensed, a chemical alarm is set off in the nervous system, causing the release of stress hormones including adrenaline, norepinephrine, and cortisol. These stress hormones race through the bloodstream to make the body ready for "fight or flight." Heart rate and blood flow increase, blood vessels under the skin constrict to prevent blood loss in case of injury, pupils dilate, and blood sugar ramps up for an energy boost. At the same time, body processes that are not essential to immediate survival are suppressed. Digestive and reproductive systems slow down, growth hormones are switched off, and the immune response is inhibited.

Extended or repeated activation of the stress response takes a heavy toll on the body. Distress can lead to physical symptoms including headaches, upset stomach, elevated blood pressure, chest pain, and problems sleeping. Research suggests that stress also can bring on or worsen certain symptoms or diseases.

Signs and Symptoms of Stress

Common warning signs of stress include cognitive, emotional, physical and behavioral symptoms.

Cognitive Symptoms: memory problems, indecisiveness, inability to concentrate, trouble thinking clearly, poor judgment, seeing only the negative, anxious or racing thoughts, constant worrying, loss of objectivity, and fearful anticipation.

Emotional Symptoms: moodiness, agitation, restlessness, short temper, irritability, impatience, inability to relax, feeling tense, feeling overwhelmed, sense of loneliness and isolation, and depression or general unhappiness.

Physical Symptoms: headaches or backaches, muscle tension and stiffness, diarrhea or constipation, nausea, dizziness, insomnia, chest pain, rapid heartbeat, weight gain or loss, and skin breakouts.

Behavioral Symptoms: Eating more or less, sleeping too much or too little, isolating self from others, procrastination, neglecting responsibilities, nervous habits, teeth grinding, over-reacting, and using alcohol, cigarettes or drugs.

Prolonged exposure to stress increases risk of heart disease, obesity, and infection. Because of the widespread damage stress can cause, it's essential to learn how to deal with it in a positive way to reduce its impact on daily life and health.

Any dramatic life change can be stressful, whether it be a divorce, a child leaving home, a pregnancy, move to a new town, career change, or diagnosis of a serious disease. Any event that causes an adjustment and requires coping skills can result in stress.



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Coping with Stress

Practicing stress management strategies can help decrease the effects of ongoing stress. Managing stress is all about taking charge of thoughts, emotions, and environmental situations. Stress management strategies include:

- Avoiding unnecessary stress by learning how to say "no" to stressful situations
- Compromising
- Managing time by prioritizing tasks
- Accepting things that cannot be changed
- Adjusting attitudes by focusing on the positive aspects of a situation

Making time for rest and relaxation, eating a healthy diet, and participating in a daily exercise routine can contribute to stress relief.

For more information please visit the following sites:

http://www.helpguide.org/mental/stress_signs.htm

http://www.webmd.com/content/pages/7/1674_52147.htm