

STRESS

What causes stress?

Stress is caused by the body's instinct to defend itself. This instinct is useful in emergencies, such as getting out of the way of a speeding car. But it can cause physical problems if it goes on for too long, such as in response to life's daily challenges and changes. When this happens, it's as though your body gets ready to jump out of the way of the car, but you're sitting still. Your body is working overtime, with no place to put all the extra energy. This can make you feel anxious, afraid, worried, and uptight.

What changes may be stressful?

Any sort of change can make you feel stressed, even a good change. It's not just the change or event itself, but also how you react to it that matters. What may be stressful is different for each person. For example, one person may not feel stressed by retiring from work, while another may find this stressful.

Things that may be stressful include being laid off, getting married or divorced, moving to a new place, having a baby or getting promoted. Money problems, illness or a loved one's death can also cause stress.

Can stress hurt my health?

Stress can cause health problems or make problems worse if you don't learn ways to deal with it. Talk to your doctor if you think some of your symptoms are due to stress. It's important to make sure that your symptoms aren't caused by other health problems.

What can I do to reduce my stress?

The first step is to learn to recognize when you're feeling stressed. One early warning sign of stress is tension in your shoulders and neck.

The next step is to choose a way to deal with your stress. One way is to avoid the event or thing that leads to your stress, but this is often not possible. A second way is to change how you react to stress.

Why is exercise useful?

Exercise is useful for dealing with stress because it is a healthy way to relieve your pent-up energy and tension. It also helps you get in better shape, which makes you feel better overall.

What is meditation?

Meditation is a form of guided thought. It can take many forms. You may do it with exercise that uses the same motions over and over, like walking or swimming. You may do it by practicing relaxation training, by stretching or by breathing deeply.

Relaxation training is easy. Start with one muscle. Hold it tight for a few seconds. Then relax the muscle. Do this with each of your muscles.

Stretching can also help relieve tension. For example, reach toward the ceiling and bend side to side slowly. Deep, relaxed breathing by itself may help relieve stress. If you want more help treating stress symptoms, ask your doctor.

Possible Signs of Stress:

- Anxiety
- Back pain
- Constipation or diarrhea
- Depression
- Fatigue
- Headaches
- High blood pressure
- Insomnia
- Problems with relationships
- Shortness of breath
- Stiff neck
- Upset stomach
- Weight gain or loss

Tips for Dealing with Stress:

- Don't worry about things you can't control, like the weather.
- Do something about the things you can control.
- Prepare to the best of your ability for events you know may be stressful.
- Work to resolve conflicts with other people.
- Ask for help with friends, family or professionals (for example, your doctor)
- Set realistic goals at home and at work.
- Exercise.
- Meditate.
- Get away from your daily stresses with group sports, social events and hobbies.
- Try to look at change as positive challenge, not a threat.

Steps to Deep Breathing:

- Lie down on a flat surface.
- Place a hand on your stomach, just above your navel. Place the other hand on your chest.
- Breathe in slowly and try to make your stomach rise a little.
- Hold your breath for a second.
- Breathe out slowly and let your stomach go back down.