

Stress Management

Virtually everyone today lives with some form of stress. And yet most people are unaware of the profound impact stress has on health. Surveys indicate that stress and its related conditions form the second most commonly reported group of work related ill-health conditions, after musculoskeletal disorders. Stress also dramatically affects the immune system and how we cope with illness. **It is estimated that 500,000 people in the UK experience stress at work at a level that is making them ill. The total number of working days lost due to this condition in 2015/16 was 11.7 million days.**

So to be healthy, and to make your health last a lifetime, it is important to understand the sources of stress in your life and what you can do to manage them.

What is stress? Stress is not the actual events in your life. Stress is your body's reaction to those events. When you are faced with a stressful situation, your body produces a "stress response" to give you the extra energy you need to deal with that situation.

The stress response: When you encounter a perceived threat — 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-limiting. Once a perceived threat has passed, hormone levels return to normal. 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 stressors are always present and you constantly feel under attack, that fight-or-flight reaction stays turned on.

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:

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Digestive problems
- Heart disease
- Sleep problems
- Weight gain
- Memory and concentration impairment

What triggers a stress response? A wide variety of factors stimulate a stress response that can be broken down to four main categories of **triggers**, any of which can produce the same hormone-mediated response.

1. Psychological

- Aggravation
- Anxiety
- Anger

2. Environmental

- Chemical/toxin exposure
- Infection/allergens
- Intestinal dysbiosis
- Noise
- Flashing light
- Vibration

3. Metabolic

- Oxidative stress (free radicals)
- Inflammation
- Nutrient deficiency
- High sugar / high fat / poor diet

4. Physiological

- Accidents
- Surgery
- Burns
- Intense exercise
- Pain
- Poor sleep

HEALTH MATTERS!

Management techniques for relieving stress

So what can you do? Avoiding stressful situations is obviously the best solution – but there is no need to quit your job or abandon your children! There are other ways to effectively manage the body's stress response and minimise the negative effects of stress - to achieve a balanced lifestyle.

1. Diet: Building a foundation of health also includes consuming a nutritious, balanced diet. A good diet will help prepare your body for daily stress – by providing the nutrients to support the adrenal glands and the other factors of the stress response. An unhealthy, imbalanced diet, triggering continuous fluctuations in blood sugar, will only make you feel sluggish and less able to cope with life's demands. **Try to incorporate the following foods into your diet.**

Make sure you eat at least five portions of fruit and vegetables each day and focus on foods containing Vitamins B and C, and Magnesium:

- **B Vitamins** can help you feel more energetic after a stressful episode. Choose bananas, leafy green vegetables, avocados, nuts, seeds, meat, fish & dairy products.
- **Vitamin C.** The adrenal glands contain the largest store of vitamin C in the body and are important in the production of stress hormones. Eat citrus fruits, tomatoes, peppers, kiwi fruit, leafy green vegetables, broccoli and other foods rich in Vitamin C.
- **Magnesium** can help to relax muscles and reduce anxiety. Increase your intake by eating nuts, especially Brazil, and hazelnuts and peanuts. Leafy green vegetables, whole grains, especially oats, brown rice and beans are also good sources.

As well as trying to maximise your intake of certain foodstuffs, you should also be aware of the negative effects of others and therefore try to minimise them.

- Caffeine is found mostly in coffee, tea, some soft drinks and chocolate, can have negative effects on the body if taken in high quantities (>5 cups/daily).
 - Substitute coffee or tea with decaffeinated versions, herbal tea, or green tea (high in antioxidants).
- Reduce your intake of alcohol, sugar and salt, as they are known to strip the body of essential nutrients and undo the work of a healthier diet.

2. Sleep: Sleep is essential in restoring health and vitality to your mind and body. With the right amount of sleep (7-8hrs/night), you could feel more energetic and better able to cope with stressful situations. Without enough sleep you may suffer from increased tension and fatigue and impaired concentration and reflexes.

3. Exercise: Along with adequate sleep and a healthy diet, it is important for you to exercise regularly to help release stress related tension. Incorporating 10 to 30 minutes of daily moderate physical activity may significantly reduce stress related tension - within weeks you should notice an increase in stamina, energy and overall well-being.

4. Practice relaxation techniques: When we are under stress we carry a great deal of physical and emotional tension that can negatively impact on mental functioning. True relaxation can be measured by enhanced health, improved mental capacity and increased vitality, as can decreases in heart rate, blood pressure and respiratory rate. Yoga, meditation and regular massage therapy could help. You can also take a relaxing bath with a good handful of Epsom salts as these contain magnesium that can be absorbed through your skin.

5. Choose to have positive attitude: Choosing to have a positive attitude is essential to dealing with stress. It is easy to let a constant influx of negative stimuli influence your outlook on life. Life can feel overwhelming and facing it with a positive attitude can help you feel more in control. Make a conscious effort to "shut out" negative thoughts; indulge in an uplifting book, music or movie.

Please Note: This handout should only be used as a guide to help inform you of the diet and lifestyle modifications that **may** help to lower stress levels. It **should not** be used as definitive guide to stress management. If you think you may have issues with stress then please contact a medical doctor, or a qualified nutritionist.