

Stress and Your Body

Stress is something that most people experience from time to time, and it's a normal part of life. A small amount of stress is usually nothing to worry about; in fact in some situations, stress is helpful. It can spur you on to achieve things or push you to meet that deadline. But constant, or long-term stress, can have detrimental effects on your body, wearing you down and making you mentally and physically sick.

Recognizing your own stress symptoms can be tricky; there are many of them and they can be hard to pin down. You might not even recognize the symptoms or notice how stress is affecting your body until you get to breaking point.

What Does Stress Do to Your Body?

Our bodies are pretty resilient, we are designed to be able to experience stress and react to it. There are even different names for the different types of stress - positive, helpful stress is called eustress while negative, unhealthy stress, the type that you feel when you're permanently overwhelmed, suffering constant challenges is called distress. This type of stress needs to be recognised and dealt with before it builds up and distress-related tension develops.

The Statistics

- Forty-three per cent of adults are thought to experience negative health effects from distress.
- Seventy-five to 90 per cent of visits to the doctor's office are about stress-related complaints.
- The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has even declared stress a workplace hazard. Stress costs American industry more than \$300 billion per year.

A Body in Distress

Distress is unhealthy and can cause a range of unpleasant symptoms including headaches, stomach problems (like IBS), raised blood pressure, pains in your chest, and problems with sleep. It's possible that high levels of stress may also make existing medical conditions worse. Another problem that can arise from being over-stressed is that as human beings, we are programmed to look for the fastest and most effective ways to quickly reduce stress levels, and they aren't always healthy. Smoking, drinking alcohol or drugs may provide temporary relief but in the long term, rather than relaxing you, these substances tend to keep the body in a high-stressed state and can lead to even more problems, like addiction or substance-related health conditions.

Better Ways to Cope with Stress

You'll know the ways that being stressed out affects you personally. Maybe it causes your skin to flare up. Or you get an IBS attack. Don't ignore these symptoms – they can be your body's way of warning you that it's all getting a bit too much and you need to calm yourself down. Don't reach for the junk food or wine bottle when you're stressed – you'll appreciate little treats more when you're relaxed and relying on unhealthy crutches to get you through can lead to long term issues on top of the underlying stress.

Massage is a well-known stress reliever – physically it will un-knot the tense muscles causing headaches and neck/shoulder pain. Emotionally, massage therapy stimulates production of feel-good hormones serotonin and dopamine, so you don't need the chemical relaxants. Reach for the massage therapist's number next time the stress builds up and do yourself and your body a big favour.