

The Physical Effects of Stress

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Stress has become one of America's leading health concerns. In fact, recent research performed by the American Psychological Association shows that 51 percent of women and 43 percent of men in America experience negative side effects of chronic stress.

Left untreated, the side effects associated with chronic stress can become severe, leading to unhealthy coping habits, mental health disorders, or the development of other chronic conditions, such as heart disease or diabetes. In order to combat the very real physical effects of stress, experts recommend a number of lifestyle changes to reduce the symptoms of chronic stress for Americans.

What is stress?

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, stress can be defined as "the brain's response to any demand." Stress can be triggered by a number of events, positive and negative, real and perceived.

Changes that trigger stress can be mild, such as riding a rollercoaster, competing for a promotion at work, or watching a scary movie. Major changes can include an unexpected loss, a wedding or divorce, or exposure to physical harm.

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) indicates that there are three main types of stress, each carrying varying risks to your physical or mental health.

1. Routine stress comes with the pressures of day-to-day life, such as work and family obligations
2. Stress brought about by an unexpected change outside of your normal routines, such as divorce, financial issues, or a sudden change in employment status
3. Traumatic stress, which occurs in a large, life-altering event, like a natural disaster, terrorist attack, or assault, where one would question whether or not they are in danger

How does stress impact the body?

Not all stress is bad. In fact, many of the responses to stress such as quickened heartbeat, increased breath intake, and heightened brain function are all responses aimed to help a person survive a dangerous situation. Some stressors can even be positive, and motivate a person to be successful at work or achieve a hard-to-reach goal.

The impacts of chronic stress, however, are much more severe, as those sometimes life-saving responses to stressors have an impact on other systems. For example, when faced with periods of chronic stress, the body's immune system function is lowered, and the digestive, excretory, and reproductive systems no longer function the way they should.

These problems typically subside once our body suspects that the threat has passed, but if the source of stress is constant, a number of physical and mental health issues can manifest.

What are the health implications associated with chronic stress?

The body responds to each of the three types of stress in similar ways, but this manifests itself in each person differently. Common symptoms of chronic stress include:

- Headaches
- Upset stomach
- Elevated blood pressure
- Chest pain
- Lack of motivation
- Change in appetite
- Change in sex drive
- Anger or irritability
- Difficulty sleeping
- Increased risk of developing viral infections

Left untreated, chronic stress can also exacerbate the symptoms of other chronic conditions like asthma, heart disease, diabetes, arthritis, depression, and anxiety.

How to manage and cope with stress

The effects of stress often manifest themselves over a long period of time. As such, adopting proactive and practical approaches to manage and cope with stress is an important practice for everyone. Some of these actions can include:

- Give up bad habits, such as excessive drinking, smoking cigarettes, or consuming too much caffeine
- Seek mental health treatment from a qualified mental health care provider, especially if you have previously used drugs or alcohol as a coping mechanism, or have suicidal thoughts
- Check-in with your healthcare provider regularly about new or worsening side effects of stress
- Join an anxiety disorder support group
- Stay in touch with family members or friends who can lend a helping hand when you get too overwhelmed
- Learn to recognize the symptoms of chronic stress, and be mindful of times when you experience those symptoms more so than usual
- Make it a point to prioritize your day-to-day tasks, and say no to additional tasks that will prevent you from accomplishing your goals
- Make lists of the things you've accomplished—not the things you were unable to do
- Exercise on a regular basis and consider a change in diet to reduce stress and to improve your mood

Stress is a normal part of our day-to-day lives and responses can be triggered by a number of situations. Although not all forms of stress are bad, prolonged exposure to stressors can lead to a number of physical and mental health issues and exacerbate already existing chronic conditions.

For the nearly 50 percent of Americans who voice concerns about chronic stress, there are actions people can take in order to better manage their symptoms. Every person experiences stress to varying degrees, and as such, implementing an individualized self-care routine is important when combating the physical effects of stress.

With stress being such a common factor in today's society, it will be important for the next generation of nurses to be able to assess and help patients deal with day-to-day and chronic stressors.

Through Ohio University's comprehensive [Master of Science in Nursing](#) program, active registered nurses will advance their education and gain the skills necessary to help patients from all walks of life treat these conditions.

Sources:

[America Psychological Association, "Americans Engage in Unhealthy Behaviors to Manage Stress"](#)

[National Institute of Mental Health, "5 Things You Should Know About Stress"](#)

[City of St. Louis, Missouri, "Good Stress & Bad Stress – Know the Difference"](#)

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