



WomensHealth.gov

1-800-994-9662

TDD: 1-888-220-5446

Stress and Your Health

Q: What are some of the most common causes of stress?

A: Stress can arise for a variety of reasons. Stress can be brought about by a traumatic accident, death, or emergency situation. Stress can also be a side effect of a serious illness or disease.

There is also stress associated with daily life, the workplace, and family responsibilities. It's hard to stay calm and relaxed in our hectic lives. As women, we have many roles: spouse, mother, caregiver, friend, and/or worker. With all we have going on in our lives, it seems almost impossible to find ways to

de-stress. But it's important to find those ways. Your health depends on it.

Q: What are some early signs of stress?

A: Stress can take on many different forms, and can contribute to symptoms of illness. Common symptoms include headache, sleep disorders, difficulty concentrating, short-temper, upset stomach, job dissatisfaction, low morale, depression, and anxiety.

Q: How do women tend to react to stress?

A: We all deal with stressful things like traffic, arguments with spouses, and job problems. Some researchers think that women handle stress in a unique way: we tend and befriend.

- **Tend:** women protect and care for their children



I have two full time jobs—I'm a customer service center manager and a mom of two young kids. I see myself as a happy person and a hard worker. But last month, the commute to work, my job, the

chores around the house, and trying to spend enough time with my kids was really stressing me out. I have to get up really early in the morning to get the kids ready for school, then it takes me so long to get to work that I'm in a bad mood by the time I get there. My office is short-staffed and we had a lot of deadlines to meet so I was working overtime. My home life

suffered?traffic going home doesn't help my mood, and when I got there, I was just so tired I didn't want to do anything! But I was faced with making dinner and doing laundry. My kids need my attention too!

I wanted to handle my stress before it got the best of me. I talked with my boss about working later hours so I don't run into so much traffic and am in a better mood when I get there and get home. I asked my husband to pick up the kids from school, and he has offered to help more with dinner and the laundry. When he cooks, I go for a bike ride with my kids. I also started setting five minutes aside in the morning and in the afternoon at work for me to relax and take a deep breath. These small changes have made a big difference in my life!



WomensHealth.gov

1-800-994-9662

TDD: 1-888-220-5446

- **Befriend:** women seek out and receive social support

During stress, women tend to care for their children and find support from their female friends. Women's bodies make chemicals that are believed to promote these responses. One of these chemicals is oxytocin (ahk-see-toe-sin), which has a calming effect during stress. This is the same chemical released during childbirth and found at higher levels in breastfeeding mothers, who are believed to be calmer and more social than women who don't breastfeed. Women also have the hormone estrogen, which boosts the effects of oxytocin. Men, however, have high levels of testosterone during stress, which blocks the calming effects of oxytocin and causes hostility, withdrawal, and anger.

Q: How does stress affect my body and my health?

A: Everyone has stress. We have short-term stress, like getting lost while driving or missing the bus. Even everyday events, such as planning a meal or making time for errands, can be stressful. This kind of stress can make us feel worried or anxious.

Other times, we face long-term stress, such as racial discrimination, a life-threatening illness, or divorce. These stressful events also affect your health on many levels. Long-term stress is real and can increase your risk for some health problems, like depression.

Both short and long-term stress can have effects on your body. Research is starting to show the serious effects of stress on our bodies. Stress triggers changes in our bodies and makes us

more likely to get sick. It can also make problems we already have worse. It can play a part in these problems:

- trouble sleeping
- headaches
- constipation
- diarrhea
- irritability
- lack of energy
- lack of concentration
- eating too much or not at all
- anger
- sadness
- higher risk of asthma and arthritis flare-ups
- tension
- stomach cramping
- stomach bloating
- skin problems, like hives
- depression
- anxiety
- weight gain or loss
- heart problems
- high blood pressure
- irritable bowel syndrome
- diabetes
- neck and/or back pain
- less sexual desire
- harder to get pregnant

Q: What are some of the most stressful life events?

A: Any change in our lives can be stressful?even some of the happiest ones like



WomensHealth.gov

1-800-994-9662

TDD: 1-888-220-5446

having a baby or taking a new job. Here are some of life's most stressful events.

- death of a spouse
- divorce
- marital separation
- spending time in jail
- death of a close family member
- personal illness or injury
- marriage
- pregnancy
- retirement

From the Holmes and Rahe Scale of Life Events (1967)

Q: What is post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)?

A: Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can be a debilitating condition that can occur after exposure to a terrifying event or ordeal in which grave physical harm occurred or was threatened. Traumatic events that can trigger PTSD include violent personal assaults such as rape or mugging, natural or human-caused disasters, accidents, or military combat.

Many people with PTSD repeatedly re-experience the ordeal in the form of flashback episodes, memories, nightmares, or frightening thoughts, especially when they are exposed to events or objects that remind them of the trauma. Anniversaries of the event can also trigger symptoms. People with PTSD also can have emotional numbness, sleep disturbances, depression, anxiety, irritability, or outbursts of anger. Feelings of intense guilt (called survivor guilt) are also common, partic-

ularly if others did not survive the traumatic event.

Most people who are exposed to a traumatic, stressful event have some symptoms of PTSD in the days and weeks following the event, but the symptoms generally disappear. But about 8% of men and 20% of women go on to develop PTSD, and roughly 30% of these people develop a chronic, or long-lasting, form that persists throughout their lives.

Q: How can I help handle my stress?

A: Don't let stress make you sick. As women, we tend to carry a higher burden of stress than we should. Often we aren't even aware of our stress levels. Listen to your body, so that you know when stress is affecting your health. Here are ways to help you handle your stress.

- **Relax.** It's important to unwind. Each person has her own way to relax. Some ways include deep breathing, yoga, meditation, and massage therapy. If you can't do these things, take a few minutes to sit, listen to soothing music, or read a book.
- **Make time for yourself.** It's important to care for yourself. Think of this as an order from your doctor, so you don't feel guilty! No matter how busy you are, you can try to set aside at least 15 minutes each day in your schedule to do something for yourself, like taking a bubble bath, going for a walk, or calling a friend.
- **Sleep.** Sleeping is a great way to help both your body and mind.



WomensHealth.gov

1-800-994-9662

TDD: 1-888-220-5446

Your stress could get worse if you don't get enough sleep. You also can't fight off sickness as well when you sleep poorly. With enough sleep, you can tackle your problems better and lower your risk for illness. Try to get seven to nine hours of sleep every night.

- **Eat right.** Try to fuel up with fruits, vegetables, and proteins. Good sources of protein can be peanut butter, chicken, or tuna salad. Eat whole-grains, such as wheat breads and wheat crackers. Don't be fooled by the jolt you get from caffeine or sugar. Your energy will wear off.
- **Get moving.** Believe it or not, getting physical activity not only helps relieve your tense muscles, but helps your mood too! Your body makes certain chemicals, called endorphins, before and after you work out. They relieve stress and improve your mood.
- **Talk to friends.** Talk to your friends to help you work through your stress. Friends are good listeners. Finding someone who will let you talk freely about your problems and feelings without judging you does a world of good. It also helps to hear a different point of view. Friends will remind you that you're not alone.
- **Get help from a professional if you need it.** Talk to a therapist. A therapist can help you work through stress and find better ways to deal with problems. For more serious stress related disorders, like PTSD,

therapy can be helpful. There also are medications that can help ease symptoms of depression and anxiety and help promote sleep.

- **Compromise.** Sometimes, it's not always worth the stress to argue. Give in once in awhile.
- **Write down your thoughts.** Have you ever typed an email to a friend about your lousy day and felt better afterward? Why not grab a pen and paper and write down what's going on in your life! Keeping a journal can be a great way to get things off your chest and work through issues. Later, you can go back and read through your journal and see how you've made progress!
- **Help others.** Helping someone else can help you. Help your neighbor, or volunteer in your community.
- **Get a hobby.** Find something you enjoy. Make sure to give yourself time to explore your interests.
- **Set limits.** When it comes to things like work and family, figure out what you can really do. There are only so many hours in the day. Set limits with yourself and others. Don't be afraid to say NO to requests for your time and energy.
- **Plan your time.** Think ahead about how you're going to spend your time. Write a to-do list. Figure out what's most important to do.
- **Don't deal with stress in unhealthy ways.** This includes drinking too much alcohol, using drugs, smoking, or overeating.



WomensHealth.gov

1-800-994-9662

TDD: 1-888-220-5446

Q: I heard deep breathing could help my stress. How do I do it?

A: Deep breathing is a good way to relax. Try it a couple of times every day. Here's how to do it.

- 1 Lie down or sit in a chair.
- 2 Rest your hands on your stomach.
- 3 Slowly count to four and inhale through your nose. Feel your stomach rise. Hold it for a second.
- 4 Slowly count to four while you exhale through your mouth. To control how fast you exhale, purse your lips like you're going to whistle. Your stomach will slowly fall.
- 5 Repeat five to 10 times.

Q: Does stress cause ulcers?

A: Doctors used to think that ulcers were caused by stress and spicy foods. Now, we know that stress doesn't cause ulcers—it just irritates them. Ulcers are actually caused by a bacterium (germ) called *H. pylori*. Researchers don't yet know for sure how people get it. They think people might get it through food or water. It's treated with a combination of antibiotics and other drugs. ■



WomensHealth.gov

1-800-994-9662

TDD: 1-888-220-5446

For More Information . . .

You can find out more about stress by contacting the National Women's Health Information Center (NWHIC) at 1-800-994-9662 or the following organizations:

National Institute of Mental Health

Phone: (301) 443-4513

Internet Address:

<http://www.nimh.nih.gov>

National Mental Health Consumers' Self-Help Clearinghouse

Phone: (800) 553-4539

Internet Address:

<http://www.mhselfhelp.org>

National Mental Health Information Center

Phone: (800) 789-2647

Internet Address: <http://www.mental-health.org>

American Institute of Stress

Phone: (914) 963-1200

Internet Address: <http://www.stress.org>

American Psychiatric Association

Phone: (703) 907-7300

Internet Address: <http://www.psych.org>

American Psychological Association

Phone: (800) 374-2721

Internet Address: <http://www.apa.org>

Anxiety Disorders Association of America

Phone: (240) 485-1001

Internet Address: <http://www.adaa.org>

National Alliance for the Mentally Ill

Phone: (800) 950-6264

Internet Address: <http://www.nami.org>

National Center for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

Phone: (802) 296-5132

Internet Address: <http://www.ncptsd.org>

National Mental Health Association

Phone: (800) 969-6642

Internet Address: <http://www.nmha.org>

All material contained in the FAQs is free of copyright restrictions, and may be copied, reproduced, or duplicated without permission of the Office on Women's Health in the Department of Health and Human Services; citation of the source is appreciated.

Content last updated August 1, 2005.