

Stress, Adult

Stress is a normal reaction to life events. Stress is what someone feels when life demands more than he or she is used to, or more than the person thinks he or she can handle.

Some stress can be useful, such as studying for a test or meeting a deadline at work. Stress that occurs too often or for too long can cause problems. It can:

- Affect a person's emotional health.
- Interfere with relationships and normal daily activities.

Too much stress can weaken the body's defense system (*immune system*) and increase the risk for physical illness. If a person already has a medical problem, stress can make it worse.

What are the causes?

All sorts of life events can cause stress. An event that causes stress for you may not be stressful for someone else. Major life events, whether positive or negative, commonly cause stress. Examples include:

- Losing a job or starting a new job.
- Losing a loved one.
- Moving to a new town or home.
- Getting married or divorced.
- Having a baby.
- Getting injured or sick.

Less obvious life events can also cause stress, especially if they occur day after day or in combination with each other. Examples include:

- Working long hours.
- Driving in traffic.
- Caring for children.
- Being in debt.
- Being in a difficult relationship.

What are the signs or symptoms?

Stress can cause emotional symptoms, including:

- Anxiety. This is feeling worried, afraid, on edge, overwhelmed, or out of control.
- Anger, including irritation or impatience.
- Depression. This is feeling sad, down, helpless, or guilty.
- Trouble focusing, remembering, or making decisions.

Stress can cause physical symptoms, including:

- Aches and pains. These may affect your head, neck, back, stomach, or other areas of your body.
- Tight muscles or a clenched jaw.
- Low energy.
- Trouble sleeping.

Stress can cause unhealthy behaviors, including:

- Eating to feel better (*overeating*) or skipping meals.
- Working too much or putting off tasks.
- Smoking, drinking alcohol, or using drugs to feel better.

How is this diagnosed?

Stress is diagnosed through an assessment by your health care provider. He or she may diagnose this condition based on:

- Your symptoms and any stressful life events.
- Your medical history.
- Tests to rule out other causes of your symptoms.

Depending on your condition, your health care provider may refer you to a specialist for further evaluation.

How is this treated?

Stress management techniques are the recommended treatment for stress. Medicine is not typically recommended for the treatment of stress.



Techniques to reduce your reaction to stressful life events include:

- Stress identification. Monitor yourself for symptoms of stress and identify what causes stress for you. These skills may help you to avoid or prepare for stressful events.
- Time management. Set your priorities, keep a calendar of events, and learn to say no. Taking these actions can help you avoid making too many commitments.

Techniques for coping with stress include:

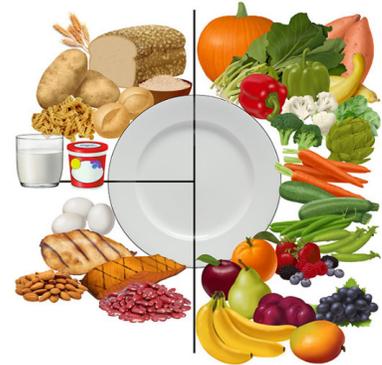
- Rethinking the problem. Try to think realistically about stressful events rather than ignoring them or overreacting. Try to find the positives in a stressful situation rather than focusing on the negatives.
- Exercise. Physical exercise can release both physical and emotional tension. The key is to find a form of exercise that you enjoy and do it regularly.
- Relaxation techniques. These relax the body and mind. The key is to find one or more that you enjoy and use the techniques regularly. Examples include:
 - Doing meditation, deep breathing, or progressive relaxation techniques.
 - Doing yoga or tai chi.
 - Practicing biofeedback, mindfulness techniques, or journal writing.
 - Listening to music, being out in nature, or participating in other hobbies.
- Practicing a healthy lifestyle. Eat a balanced diet, drink plenty of water, limit or avoid caffeine, and get plenty of sleep.
- Having a strong support network. Spend time with family, friends, or other people you enjoy being around. Express your feelings and talk things over with someone you trust.

Counseling or talk therapy with a mental health professional may be helpful if you are having trouble managing stress on your own.

Follow these instructions at home:

Lifestyle

- Avoid drugs.
- **Do not** use any products that contain nicotine or tobacco, such as cigarettes, e-cigarettes, and chewing tobacco. If you need help quitting, ask your health care provider.
- **Do not** drink alcohol if:
 - Your health care provider tells you not to drink.
 - You are pregnant, may be pregnant, or are planning to become pregnant.
- If you drink alcohol:
 - Limit how much you use to:
 - 0–1 drink a day for women.
 - 0–2 drinks a day for men.
 - Be aware of how much alcohol is in your drink. In the U.S., one drink equals one 12 oz bottle of beer (355 mL), one 5 oz glass of wine (148 mL), or one 1½ oz glass of hard liquor (44 mL).
- **Do not** use alcohol or drugs to relax.
- Eat a balanced diet that includes fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, lean meats, fish, eggs, and beans, and low-fat dairy. Avoid processed foods and foods high in added fat, sugar, and salt.
- Exercise at least 30 minutes on 5 or more days each week.
- Get 7–8 hours of sleep each night.



General instructions

- Practice stress management techniques as discussed with your health care provider.
- Drink enough fluid to keep your urine pale yellow.
- Take over-the-counter and prescription medicines only as told by your health care provider.
- Keep all follow-up visits as told by your health care provider. This is important.



Contact a health care provider if:

- Your symptoms get worse.
- You have new symptoms.
- You feel overwhelmed by your problems and can no longer manage them on your own.

Get help right away if:

- You have thoughts of hurting yourself or others.

If you ever feel like you may hurt yourself or others, or have thoughts about taking your own life, get help right away. You can go to your nearest emergency department or call:

- **Your local emergency services (911 in the U.S.).**
- **A suicide crisis helpline, such as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255. This is open 24 hours a day.**

Summary

- Stress is a normal reaction to life events. It can cause problems if it happens too often or for too long.
- Practicing stress management techniques is the recommended way to treat stress.
- Counseling or talk therapy with a mental health professional may be helpful if you are having trouble managing stress on your own.

This information is not intended to replace advice given to you by your health care provider. Make sure you discuss any questions you have with your health care provider.

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