Stress effects: how stress impacts your physical health

Stress comes in many forms, as do its effects on the body. By learning to spot some of the most common signs of stress, can help you avoid serious health consequences.

What Causes Stress?

Stress happens when body and mind must cope with an environmental, physical or emotional change. Stress is often thought of as a negative response, but in many cases, stress can provide the push you need to finish a task, meet a deadline or cross a finish line.

Nervous energy can also be tapped when you need to give a speech or presentation. But if you're exposed to stress over a long period of time, it can cause your body to go into overdrive or distress. This can affect brain function and encourage the release of stress hormones, the most well-known being cortisol. Studies suggest that elevated cortisol levels over a long period can weaken the immune system and contribute to many other conditions.

Stress Signals

Like traffic signals warning you to slow down and stop, your body provides cues when your stress has hit its limit. Some of the most common physical signs include:

Headaches. It's estimated that 90 per cent of people have, at some time, suffered a tension headache. A tightness in the forehead or neck is a common symptom of a headache caused by stress.

Fatigue. Overextending oneself physically, mentally or emotionally can not only create extra tension, but exhaustion as well. And because sleep problems like insomnia are more likely to occur during trying times, lack of energy can be a by-product of stress.

Irritability. Extended periods of stress can leave you less prepared to deal with life’s challenges and can blow minor setbacks out of proportion. Crankiness can be further heightened if you're also suffering from other stress symptoms like fatigue.

Chronic pain. A short stressful event, such as watching a scary movie, can temporarily help your body "forget" chronic pain. Research suggests, however, that extended periods of stress can increase the body's sensitivity to pain.

Skin conditions. Thought that breakout before a big event or presentation was just bad luck? It may have been caused by stress. Research suggests that cortisol release may up the skin's oil production. Tension can also trigger an autoimmune response that may cause hives and worsen dermatological conditions like rosacea, eczema and psoriasis.

High blood pressure. Stress seems to cause temporary spikes in blood pressure, which can be dangerous if you have an underlying condition such as heart disease.

Heart disease. Scientists have had trouble explaining exactly how stress increases the odds of heart disease, but the evidence shows a very strong link. In fact, a recent study revealed that workers exposed to chronic work stress doubled their chances of developing heart disease.

High cholesterol. The cause is not entirely clear, but several studies indicate stress can raise LDL or "bad" cholesterol levels. One contributing factor may be that stressed people tend to make poor health choices around smoking, drinking, diet and exercise.

Diabetes. One of the main roles of cortisol and epinephrine is to raise blood sugar levels and provide an energy boost to respond to a stressful event. While stress can't cause diabetes, it can encourage its onset in a

person who is pre-disposed.

If you're concerned about the toll stress is taking on your body, it's wise to consult a physician or health professional to minimize damage and ensure your symptoms aren't caused by another source.