The wretches of stress: how stress can damage your emotional and physical well-being

When your body senses danger your stress response, also known as a **"fight-or-flight"** reaction, kicks into high gear releasing adrenaline and cortisol—stress hormones that can help you stay focused and alert. Once the perceived threat passes, your body back to normal. This response can help you meet challenges, find the motivation to get something done and, in emergency situations, even save your life.



But, in today's modern world, filled with financial pressures, hectic schedules and commuting, stress has become a part of *daily* life. When your body's natural alarm system is always in the "on" position, stress stops being positive and can cause some major damage to your physical and mental health. In fact, a 2010 American Psychological Association survey revealed 40 per cent of Americans felt more stressed than they did five years ago, with money woes and job security high on the list as sources of stress.

Recognizing stress symptoms affecting your body, thoughts and behavior is the first step in managing this response better and minimizing its impact on your physical and emotional well-being. Left unchecked stress can lead to serious problems down the road including high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes, anxiety and depression.

Stress sources

Most of us focus on negative life events as sources of stress, but, what many people forget about are all those "positive" forces that, while seemingly good, are changes that can cause uncertainty in your abilities, confidence or routine. Common stress sources include:

- **Life transitions.** Major changes such as a death, a critical illness, or divorce can all impact your stress levels. So too can all those "happy" life events like the birth of a child, a new job or moving to a new location.
- **Outside forces.** Whether it's a devastating hurricane, financial strain caused by soaring costs, or a demotion: events or actions that affect you but which you have no control over can weigh heavy on your body and mind.
- **The "clutter" around you.** It could be a train that goes by your house 10 times a day, electronics lighting up your room at night, or a jam packed apartment—the noise, light and environmental "pollution" you experience on a daily basis can all up your stress levels.
- **Work.** Tight deadlines, unrealistic expectations or a kafuffle with colleagues are all common stress triggers. Even the increased demands of a promotion can send you into a stress-induced sweat.
- **Family demands.** Screaming toddlers, teens and tantrums, an ailing parent or a full-on family feud: while family can be a great source of support and comfort, for many, they can also add more pressure to the mix.
- **Social anxiety.** For some, group parties or events, dating or other situations where peer pressure is pervasive can send stress hormones into high gear.

The stress effect—symptoms

Nagging headaches, sleeping struggles or a general lack of motivation at work may all be caused by stress and can be common warning signs that you're under unhealthy amounts of stress. Don't brush these off! These signs and symptoms are your body's way of warning you your stress response is stuck in the "on" position. Physical symptoms of stress can include:

- Headache
- Muscle tension and pain
- Fatigue
- Sweating/hot and cold flashes

- Chest pain and/or rapid heartbeat
- Upset stomach, diarrhea or constipation
- Change in sex drive
- Frequent colds

Emotional impact

Ever notice that when you're having a bad day, even the tiniest of annoyances seem huge? That's because stress can seriously impact your ability to effectively handle everyday tasks and skew your perspective. Stress-related behaviors and emotions can include:

- Anxiety
- Lack of focus or motivation
- Depression or general unhappiness
- Irritability
- Restlessness
- Aggression
- Insomnia and nightmares
- Overeating or undereating
- Drug or alcohol abuse
- Social withdrawal
- Memory loss

When stress becomes chronic

The body's stress response can't tell the difference between physical and psychological threats. Whether it's a traffic jam, a looming deadline, or a disagreement with a friend, your body reacts the same way as it would when faced with a dangerous situation. If you're living a stressful lifestyle and your stress response is constantly active, the harder it becomes to shut it off and decompress.

Long-term exposure to the body's stress response—and the hormones that come with it—can start to affect nearly every part of your body. Chronic stress can suppress the immune system, cause high blood pressure, increase your risk of heart disease, stroke and diabetes, increase gastrointestinal issues, contribute to fertility problems and speed up the dreaded aging process. Prolonged stress has also been proven to affect your brain chemistry making you more susceptible to long-term anxiety and depression.

What can I do?

The short and long-term impact of stress on your mind and body is a serious concern. In fact, experts say that up to 50 per cent of all illnesses are caused by stress. It's important to recognize the warning signs of stress overload and know your limits. How much is too much differs from person to person. Some people have the natural ability to roll with the punches, while others shut down when faced with the smallest obstacle. Your stress threshold depends on many things, including your outlook on life, emotional health, genetics and the quality of your relationships and supports.

Stress and its dangerous effects can creep up on you—especially when it seems to have become the norm. You need to recognize when your stress levels are high, limit triggers and find coping methods that work best for you. Articles in this featured section are designed to help you understand common responses to stressful scenarios and learn how to avoid the wretches of stress.