



Whether it's a short-term frustration like a traffic jam or a major life event, psychological stress can affect our bodies.

Stress can be highly personal, with one person's unpleasant experience being another's exhilarating adventure. A little bit of stress is thought to be good for memory and motivation. However, about 70% of doctor visits and 80% of serious illnesses may be exacerbated or linked to stress.

Stress symptoms may be affecting your health, even though you might not realize it. You may think illness is to blame for that nagging headache, your frequent insomnia or your decreased productivity at work. But stress may actually be the culprit.

The Body's Stress Response

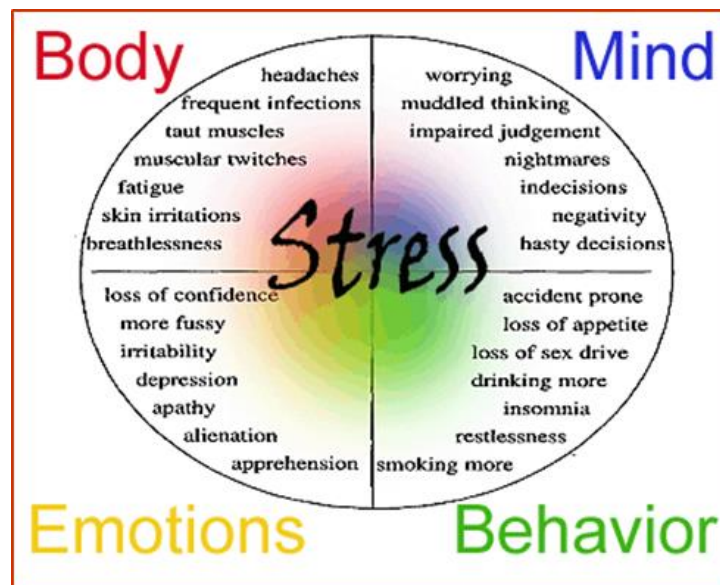
When you perceive a threat, your nervous system responds by releasing a flood of stress hormones, including adrenaline and cortisol. These hormones rouse the body for emergency action.

Your heart pounds faster, muscles tighten, blood pressure rises, breath quickens, and your senses become sharper. These physical changes increase your strength and stamina, speed your reaction time, and enhance your focus—preparing you to either fight or flee from the danger at hand.



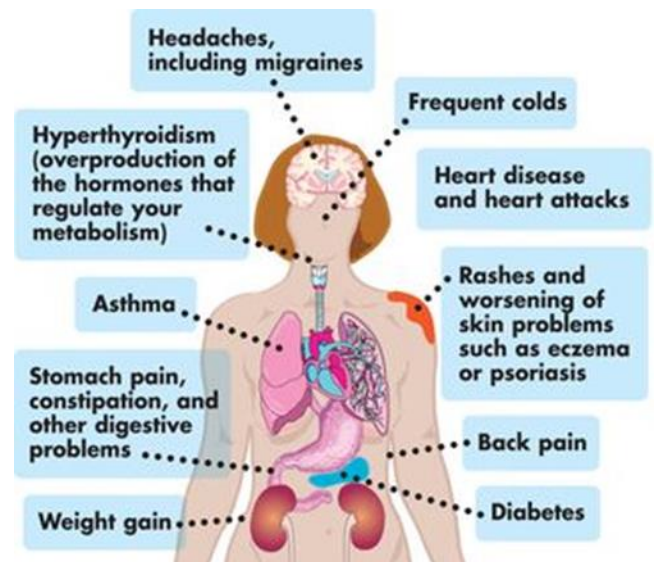
Common Effects of Stress

Indeed, stress symptoms can affect your body, your thoughts and feelings, and your behavior. Being able to recognize common stress symptoms can give you a jump on managing them. Stress that's left unchecked can contribute to health problems, such as high blood pressure, heart disease, obesity and diabetes.



Significant Health Problems Related to Stress

1. **Heart disease.** Researchers have long suspected that the stressed-out, type A personality has a higher risk of high blood pressure and heart problems. We don't know why, exactly. Stress can directly increase heart rate and blood flow, and cause the release of cholesterol and triglycerides into the blood stream. It's also possible that stress is related to other problems—an increased likelihood of smoking or obesity—that indirectly increase the heart risks. Doctors do know that sudden emotional stress can be a trigger for serious cardiac problems, including heart attacks. People who have chronic heart problems need to avoid acute stress—and learn how to successfully manage life's unavoidable stresses—as much as they can.
2. **Asthma.** Many studies have shown that stress can worsen asthma. Some evidence suggests that a parent's chronic stress might even increase the risk of developing asthma in their children. One study looked at how parental stress affected the asthma rates of young children who were also exposed to air pollution or whose mothers smoked during pregnancy. The kids with stressed out parents had a substantially higher risk of developing asthma.
3. **Obesity.** Excess fat in the belly seems to pose greater health risks than fat on the legs or hips—and unfortunately, that's just where people with high stress seem to store it. Stress causes higher levels of the hormone cortisol and that seems to increase the amount of fat that's deposited in the abdomen.
4. **Diabetes.** Stress can worsen diabetes in two ways. First, it increases the likelihood of bad behaviors, such as unhealthy eating and excessive drinking. Second, stress seems to raise the glucose levels of people with type 2 diabetes directly.
5. **Headaches.** Stress is considered one of the most common triggers for headaches—not just tension headaches, but migraines as well.
6. **Depression and anxiety.** It's probably no surprise that chronic stress is connected with higher rates of depression and anxiety. One survey of recent studies found that people who had stress related to their jobs—like demanding work with few rewards—had an 80% higher risk of developing depression within a few years than people with lower stress.
7. **Gastrointestinal problems.** Here's one thing that stress doesn't do—it doesn't cause ulcers. However, it can make them worse. Stress is also a common factor in many other GI conditions, such as chronic heartburn, gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD) and irritable bowel syndrome (IBS).
8. **Alzheimer's disease.** One animal study found that stress might worsen Alzheimer's disease, causing its brain lesions to form more quickly. Some researchers speculate that reducing stress has the potential to slow down the progression of the disease.
9. **Accelerated aging.** There's actually evidence that stress can affect how you age. One study compared the DNA of mothers who were under high stress—they were caring for a chronically ill child—with women who were not. Researchers found that a particular region of the chromosomes showed the effects of accelerated aging. Stress seemed to accelerate aging about 9 to 17 additional years.



10. **Premature death.** A study looked at the health effects of stress by studying elderly caregivers looking after their spouses—people who are naturally under a great deal of stress. It found that caregivers had a 63% higher rate of death than people their age who were not caregivers.

Coping with Stress:

Most often we cannot totally remove ourselves from stress or stressors in our lives. However, there are ways to cope with stress.

- Prayer and Scripture
- Life-style changes: Eat a balanced diet, exercise, sleep (7-8 hours per night), get out in sunlight.
- Relaxation
- Meditation and music
- Fun and laughter
- Get away
- Set priorities: Decide what must get done and what can wait, and learn to say no to new tasks if they are putting you into overload.

If you have any questions about this topic, please reach out to CompassionLink at info@compassionlink.org. We will be happy to answer your questions.

Sources:

www.mayoclinic.org/healthy.../stress

<http://www.bistromd.com/metabolic-syndrome/abdominal-fat-and-the-hormone-cortisol>

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