

IS STRESS AFFECTING YOUR HEALTH?

By: Dr. John A. Papa, DC



Have you ever wondered why some people always seem to feel sick, depressed, or constantly complain of being tired? Are you one of those individuals who frequently experiences non-descriptive aches and pain? Did you ever think that stress could be manifesting itself into physical symptoms? If you answered yes to any of these questions, then stress may be affecting your health. The term “stress” refers to any reaction to a physical, mental, social, or emotional stimulus that requires a response or

alteration to the way we perform, think, or feel. Stress can take on many forms and faces. We are all bombarded with stressful events and situations everyday. Some people handle stress well, and it has little impact on their emotional or physical health. Unfortunately, many of us are not so good at dealing with stress, and whether we realize it or not, stress can be impacting our health in a negative way. Being able to identify the symptoms of stress, and incorporating simple stress management techniques and safeguards can dramatically improve ones overall health, vitality, and well being.

There are obvious sources of stress in everyone’s life. Pressures and deadlines at work, problems with loved ones, and financial concerns and obligations are just a few. Current scientific research in the field of psychoneuroimmunology has demonstrated a definite link between our thought processes and perceptions, and how they can influence the nervous and immune systems. It all begins with our thought processing in the sensory cortex of the brain. When a stressful situation is perceived, the pituitary gland in the brain is stimulated to activate stress hormones in our adrenal glands. Stressful situations also stimulate our sympathetic nervous system. These complex series of reactions prepare the body to “fight” and have been shown to elevate blood pressure, accelerate heart rate, increase tension in muscles, slow down or stop digestion altogether, release fat and sugar stores in the body, elevate cholesterol levels, and change the composition of our blood making it more prone to clotting. Researchers estimate that stress contributes to as many as 80% of all major illnesses, including cardiovascular disease, cancer, endocrine and metabolic disease, skin disorders, and infectious ailments of all kinds. Stress can be either acute or long-term. Prolonged stress is particularly dangerous, as it wears out the body, increases ones susceptibility to illness, and slows healing. Symptoms of stress may include but are not limited to; fatigue, chronic headaches, depression, irritability, apprehension, memory loss, confusion, dizziness, low self-esteem, changes in appetite, weight gain, indigestion, gas, bloating, alternating diarrhea and constipation, nervous twitches, shallow or labored breathing, muscular weakness or tightness, insomnia, and recurrent colds or infections.

Stressful events vary from one individual to the next. There is no magic bullet when dealing with stress. Below are some suggestions that can definitely help those who are serious about not letting stress impact their health negatively. Sometimes identifying a common or persistent stressor is the first step. One must then move to confront and resolve this stressor. Keep in mind that resolution does not always yield a favorable

outcome, but it is much more productive than letting things that you cannot control dictate your stress levels. Exercise is one of the most powerful tools in helping one deal with stress. Not only does it make you physically stronger, it also has the benefits of releasing excess tension, building self-esteem, and stimulating the body's natural pain killing chemicals called endorphins. Diets that are rich in fruits and vegetables, and low in trans-fat will also serve to tone down your body's negative response to stress. Engaging in bad habits such as excessive eating, alcoholic consumption, drug use, and smoking, only serve to amplify stress symptoms, regardless of how comforting some individuals might find these behaviors in times of stress. Getting enough sleep is crucial in letting your body recharge, refresh, and recuperate. The average adult requires 7 to 8 hours of restful sleep each night. Getting less than 6 hours of sleep over a prolonged period of time predisposes individuals to accelerated aging, and increases the risk of diabetes. Finally, find a good network of friends you can trust and rely on. Talking to others in times of stress can be very comforting and therapeutic. An individual who continually fails to effectively manage stress in their life will undoubtedly have health problems. I would like to dedicate this article to an individual who not so long ago told me "let go of things that are weighing you down." This simple wisdom has showed me what health and happiness truly represent. Good luck everyone, and remember "let go of the anchor, before you drown."



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