

# Stress

## What is Stress?

Stress is the body reacting to a state of extreme difficulty, pressure, or strain. When we find ourselves facing a threatening or tense situation, our bodies undergo chemical changes that make them ready for action — whether that action is fighting or fleeing. Although this is a healthy response to an immediate danger, stress can be quite negative when we react to circumstances that are beyond our control, such as traffic jams.

We experience two types of stress: acute and chronic. Acute stress is a commonly short-term response to a tense situation that prepares us to either fight or flee from an extreme situation. Chronic stress, on the other hand, tends to last for a longer period. This type of stress can be connected with mental conditions, like depression and anxiety disorders, as well as physical problems.

## A Little Stress Isn't Always Bad

Not all stress is bad for us. The human body is built to react to stress in order to keep us alert to whatever danger we may encounter in our lives. Small amounts of stress even provide us with an opportunity to achieve great things in our jobs and our personal lives. But if a person becomes too stressed, he or she will soon find themselves overwhelmed and unable to function at their maximum potential. To that end, the secret to living with stress is learning how to manage it and making it work for you. By failing to do so, we quickly get ourselves into trouble.

## When We Stress Out

According to the National Institutes of Health's National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), when a person suffers from chronic stress, his or her hypothalamus — the part



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of the brain that controls how the body responds to stress – is constantly producing large amounts of stress hormones. The way chronic stress negatively effects the human body isn't just physical, though. Stress also affects the way we think and behave — leading to depression, obesity and substance abuse. If left unchecked, all of these could eventually lead to more serious health issues in the future, such as heart disease, poor mental health and a variety of other conditions. To illustrate this further, here are some findings about stress by the Cleveland-Clinic Foundation:

- Almost half of all adults suffer adverse health effects from stress
- 75 to 90 percent of all doctor visits are for stress-related ailments and complaints
- Stress is linked to several leading causes of death: accidents, cancer, heart disease, lung ailments and suicide



- The Occupational Safety and Health Administration declared stress a hazard of the workplace
- In terms of lost hours due to absenteeism, reduced productivity and workers' compensation benefits, stress costs American businesses more than \$300 billion annually
- More than 50% of people will have an emotional disorder in their lifetime – often due to chronic, untreated stress reactions

## How to Manage Stress

Now that we have some idea of what chronic stress can do to a person, how can we prevent it from negatively impacting our lives? First, identify what causes us stress – like conflicts at work, the death or illness of a loved one, or relationship problems. Knowing is half the battle, so by identifying the things that make our lives more stressful, we can better learn how to change and/or manage our environment.

As much as we can try to change our environment, though, it's also important to remember that some chronic stressors can't be altered. In this situation, NIMH recommends medications, relaxation and support groups as tools to manage stress.

People may want to see a healthcare professional if none of these suggestions seem to help, or if they suffer from the following signs:

- Changes in appetite
- Difficulty sleeping

- Excessive worry about the small things in life
- Frequent headaches
- Gastrointestinal distress
- Muscle tenseness and soreness
- Panic attacks
- Prolonged feelings of sadness or self-worthlessness

For more information about stress and how it affects you, please visit: [www.nih.gov](http://www.nih.gov).

For more information about  
Nationwide Better Health  
call 1-888-254-1251  
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[www.nwbetterhealth.com](http://www.nwbetterhealth.com)

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