

Stress and Your Health

How does your body react to stress?

When you sense danger or feel threatened, your nervous system tries to protect your body by releasing hormones. This is called the *Stress Response* or the *'Fight, Flight, or Freeze' Reaction*. It's your body's emergency response system to help manage stress. Your heart pounds, muscles tighten, blood pressure rises, breath quickens, and your senses sharpen. These physical changes increase your strength and stamina, speed your reaction time, improve your focus, and prepare you to respond to a stressful event or situation.

How does stress affect you?

Stress affects your mind, body, and behaviour in many ways. Everyone experiences stress differently. Whether the threat is immediate like a car driving towards you or on-going like having too many things to do and not enough time to do them, your body reacts just like you are facing an immediate life-or-death situation. If you have a lot of ongoing responsibilities and worries, your emergency stress response may be 'on' most of the time. This happens because our bodies cannot distinguish between physical and psychological threats. The more your body's stress system is activated, the harder it's to shut off.

Stress doesn't always look stressful.

One of the most dangerous things about stress is how gradually it comes on. It can start to feel familiar, comfortable, or even normal. You get used to feeling stressed and ignore it or don't notice how much it's affecting you. Long periods of unmanaged stress can become *Chronic Stress*, which over time disrupts nearly every system in your body, damaging your overall cognitive (thinking), emotional, and physical health.

Long-term exposure to stress can lead to serious health problems and is associated with diseases such as heart disease, stroke, cancer, and diabetes.

Symptoms of chronic or long-term stress.

Cognitive

- Seeing only the negative
- Anxiety
- Racing thoughts
- Constantly feeling worried
- Memory problems
- Trouble concentrating
- Poor judgement

Emotional

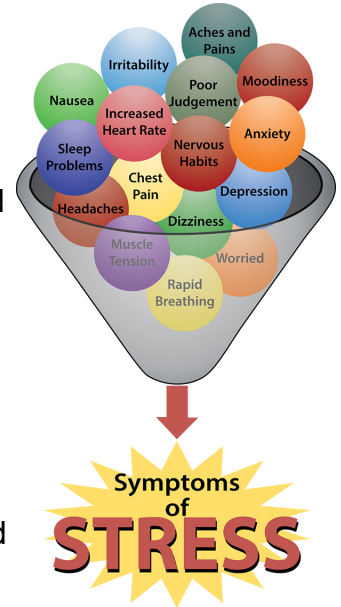
- Moodiness
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Irritable or short tempered
- Feeling agitated or angry
- General unhappiness
- Sense of loneliness and isolation

Physical

- Digestive or intestinal problems
- Nausea
- Dizziness
- Headaches
- Rapid breathing
- Increased heart rate
- Chest pain
- Aches and pains
- Muscle tension
- Frequent colds or illness

Behavioural

- Sleeping too much or too little
- Eating more or less than normal
- Nervous habits (e.g., nail biting, pacing)
- Withdrawing yourself from others
- Procrastinating or ignoring responsibilities
- Using alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs to cope



How can you manage stress and its symptoms?

Learning about the warning signs and symptoms of stress is your first step. Understanding and identifying how stress affects you is the next step. Making small changes can make a big difference!!!



Address stress in the moment.

Breathe. In a stressful moment, take a slow breath in through your nose. Expand your belly as you breathe in and slowly count to 5. Breathe out through your nose and slowly count to 5 as you exhale. While you breathe, try focusing on a positive emotion (e.g., appreciation or gratitude). This will help calm your nervous system so you can think more clearly. Practice this technique for a few minutes throughout your day and everyday to help you to manage stressful situations, whenever they happen.

Ease your mind.

Laugh. A good laugh can increase your intake of oxygen; it stimulates your heart and lungs and releases ‘feel good’ endorphins (chemicals). Laughter also stimulates circulation and can aid in muscle relaxation, which may help reduce some of the physical symptoms of stress.

Make time for yourself. Socialize, do something creative, or make time to do something that you enjoy.

Express yourself. Talking about your stress with a trusted friend or family member can calm you and may help you think differently about things. This might help you find some creative ways to problem solve, cope, or lessen some of the stress in your life.

Write it out. Keeping a journal is a good way to help you understand some of the causes of stress in your life. Knowing what your stressors are and how you react to them will help you learn how to cope better with them.

Be positive. Appreciate and focus on your strengths. Negative thoughts can increase the harmful effects of stress on your body. A positive outlook will help you cope better in stressful situations.

Set realistic goals. It’s okay to say ‘no’. Try not to over schedule yourself. Ask for help when you need it. Setting limits and letting other people know when you are feeling overwhelmed may help you reduce the amount of stress you experience.



Get Connected.

Build friendships. Stay connected. Healthy relationships provide shared respect, honesty, loyalty, and trust. A network of positive relationships can help you cope with stress.

Share meals. Sit down and eat meals with family, friends, and co-workers. Shared meals can increase connections and a sense of belonging.

Relax your body.

Be active. 30 minutes of activity 5 days a week can help boost the production of ‘feel good’ endorphins. Everyday activities such as yard work, taking the dog for a walk, or even vacuuming are great ways of increasing your daily activity.

Stretch. Gentle stretching exercises relax tense muscles and may help relieve headaches due to muscle tension—they can be done anywhere at any time. Regular stretching can improve your mood and general well-being.

Go outside. Just a few minutes outside can help you feel relaxed and recharged. A 15 minute walk in any weather will help improve your mood.

Get enough sleep. For most people this is 7-9 hours of sleep per night. Sleep improves your concentration, energy levels, and helps you cope with stress. Lack of sleep interferes with the natural pattern of hormone production and decreases your ability to cope with stress.

Eat well. Good nutrition fuels the brain and body. Taking the time to sit down and enjoy your food is a great way to unwind during the day.

Drink water. Drinking 1.5-2 litres (6-10 cups) of water a day keeps you hydrated and alert. Every cell, tissue, and organ in your body needs water to function properly.

Get a massage. Massage therapy supports relaxation and the promotion of positive feelings by increasing the chemicals that make you feel good (i.e., oxytocin, serotonin, and dopamine¹) and decreasing the chemicals that don't (i.e., cortisol²).

Learn relaxation techniques. There are many different relaxation techniques that you can do to help manage the way your body responds to stress, such as:

- Meditation
- Deep breathing
- Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR)
- Listening to calming music
- Visualization techniques

Getting Help

It takes courage to ask for help. If you don't know where to turn or you want speak to someone in private, you can call: (available in Alberta 24 hours a day, 7 days a week)

Mental Health Help Line: **1-877-303-2642**

Kids Help Phone: **1-800-668-6868**

Addiction Help Line: **1-866-332-2322**

Health Link: **811**

Helpful Websites

www.kidshelpphone.ca

www.kidshealth.org

www.mindyourmind.ca

www.fosteringresilience.com

¹ Serotonin: a chemical responsible for reducing irritability, depression, and improving brain function.

Dopamine: a chemical that supports fine motor activity, blood pressure, focus, inspiration, intuition, enthusiasm, and joy.

Oxytocin: a hormone that influences relationships such as care taking and parental or pair bonding.

² Cortisol: a hormone produced in response to stress.