HEALTH BASICS

Stress and your health

Stress is the body and mind's response to pressure or demanding situations.

WHAT IT IS
The body and mind's response to pressure

WHERE IT COMES UP
Work, caregiving, illness, relationships, money, and major changes

WHY IT MATTERS
Ongoing stress can affect physical and mental health

WHAT IT IS NOT
Not a disease or diagnosis

WHO TO ASK
A primary care clinician or mental health professional

HOW IT IS CHECKED
Conversation and questionnaires; no single diagnostic test

Overview

Stress is a normal response to pressure, uncertainty, or change. It can arise from difficult events, such as illness or job loss, but also from positive changes, such as moving home or having a baby.

A short stress response can help you focus and act. For example, it may make you more alert before an interview or when responding to danger. The response usually settles when the situation passes.

Stress becomes more important to your health when it is intense, happens often, or continues without enough time for recovery. People also differ in what they find stressful and what support or resources they have.

Stress is not a disease or a diagnosis. However, it can affect existing health conditions and may occur alongside conditions such as anxiety disorders, depression, or post-traumatic stress disorder, known as PTSD.

Stress is also not the same as anxiety. Stress usually relates to an outside demand or situation. Anxiety can continue when there is no immediate threat and may become a health condition in its own right. The two often overlap.

How it works

When your brain detects a challenge, it activates systems that prepare your body to respond. This is sometimes called the "fight, flight, or freeze" response.

Stress hormones, including adrenaline and cortisol, help make energy available. Your heart may beat faster, your breathing may become quicker, and your muscles may tighten. Attention can narrow toward the immediate challenge. Digestion and other processes that are less urgent at that moment may temporarily change.

These reactions are useful when you need to act quickly. After the challenge ends, the body is designed to move back toward its usual state.

With repeated or long-lasting pressure, the stress response may stay active more often than needed. There may be less time for sleep, physical recovery, social contact, and activities that help you feel settled. This repeated strain is sometimes called "allostatic load," meaning the wear placed on the body by ongoing adaptation.

Your response is shaped by more than the event itself. Past experiences, physical health, financial security, discrimination, working conditions, relationships, and access to support can all affect how manageable a situation feels. Stress is not simply a matter of personal strength.

Why it matters for your health

Short-term stress is not automatically harmful. It may improve concentration or motivation for a limited time. Problems are more likely when demands continue, feel uncontrollable, or exceed the support and recovery available to you.

Ongoing stress can interfere with sleep, concentration, memory, appetite, and sexual interest. It may also make it harder to keep appointments, take medicines consistently, prepare food, or remain physically active.

Stress can influence health indirectly through coping behaviours. Some people smoke more, drink more alcohol, use other substances, eat differently, or withdraw from other people. These responses may bring temporary relief while creating other health risks.

Long-term stress is associated with mental health conditions, including depression and anxiety disorders. It is also linked with changes in blood pressure and with poorer outcomes in some cardiovascular and metabolic conditions. These links are complex: stress is usually one factor among genetics, living conditions, health behaviours, and access to care.

If you already live with asthma, migraine, chronic pain, eczema, irritable bowel syndrome, diabetes, or another ongoing condition, stressful periods may coincide with changes in how

manageable that condition feels. This does not mean stress is the sole cause, and new or worsening problems still deserve appropriate medical assessment.

What can go wrong

Stress itself is not an illness. However, difficult or prolonged circumstances can relate to several health situations.

Anxiety disorders and depression may occur alongside ongoing stress. Persistent worry, loss of interest, hopelessness, or difficulty functioning should not automatically be dismissed as "just stress."

Post-traumatic stress disorder can develop after exposure to traumatic events. It may involve unwanted memories, avoidance, feeling constantly on guard, or changes in mood. PTSD is a specific mental health condition, not another name for everyday stress.

Burnout refers to work-related exhaustion, mental distance from a job, and reduced professional effectiveness. The World Health Organization classifies it as an occupational phenomenon rather than a medical condition. Similar exhaustion outside work may have many causes and should not automatically be labelled burnout.

Sleep and substance-use problems can become self-reinforcing. Poor sleep may reduce your ability to cope the next day, while alcohol and some drugs can worsen sleep, mood, and anxiety over time.

Physical conditions can be overlooked if every change is attributed to stress. Chest discomfort, weight change, ongoing digestive problems, palpitations, pain, or severe fatigue can have many causes. A clinician can help decide whether an examination or testing is appropriate.

Seek routine medical or mental health follow-up if stress is lasting, repeatedly disrupting daily life, or making an existing condition harder to manage. Arrange prompt help if you feel unable to cope, are using alcohol or drugs in a risky way, or have major changes in sleep, mood, or functioning.

Seek emergency help for thoughts of suicide or immediate self-harm risk, severe breathing difficulty, fainting, signs of a stroke, or new or severe chest pain. Use your local emergency number or crisis service. These symptoms should not be assumed to be stress.

What you can do

There is no blood test, scan, or cortisol test that measures everyday stress or proves that it is causing a health problem. A clinician will usually ask about what is happening, how long it has been happening, and how it affects sleep, mood, relationships, work, and daily tasks. Questionnaires can support this conversation but do not provide a diagnosis by themselves.

A short record may make patterns easier to discuss. Note:

Ask a clinician whether another condition or a medicine could be contributing to what you are experiencing. You can also ask whether counselling, structured psychological therapy, workplace support, social services, or treatment for a related condition may be appropriate.

Practical steps should fit the source of the pressure. A breathing exercise cannot solve unsafe housing, discrimination, debt, or an unmanageable workload. In those situations, useful action may include contacting a housing service, benefits adviser, union, employee assistance programme, caregiver service, school support team, or community organisation.

For day-to-day recovery, regular sleep times, physical activity that suits your health, meals at steady times, and contact with supportive people may help. Brief relaxation or breathing exercises can reduce immediate tension for some people. These are coping tools, not cures for difficult circumstances.

- The main pressures or events
- Sleep, mood, physical changes, and daily functioning
- Alcohol, nicotine, caffeine, or other substance use
- What helps and what makes things harder
- Changes in existing health conditions

Common questions

Can stress cause physical sensations?

Yes. The stress response can be associated with muscle tension, a faster heartbeat, sweating, stomach changes, headaches, or disturbed sleep. Similar sensations can also have other causes. New, persistent, severe, or concerning changes should be assessed rather than assumed to be stress.

Should I have my cortisol level tested?

Usually not for everyday stress. Cortisol testing is used when clinicians suspect specific disorders involving the adrenal or pituitary glands. A single level does not measure how stressed you are.

Is all stress bad?

No. Short-lived stress can support attention and action. The greater health concern is stress that is severe, repeated, or prolonged without enough recovery and support.

Does feeling stressed mean I have an anxiety disorder?

No. Stress and anxiety can overlap, but an anxiety disorder is a clinical condition assessed from the pattern, duration, and effect of anxiety. A qualified clinician can evaluate persistent or disabling concerns.

Can medication treat stress?

There is no medicine that treats stress as a general life response. Medication may be used for a diagnosed condition that occurs alongside it, such as depression or an anxiety disorder. The choice requires an individual clinical assessment.

When should I make a routine appointment?

Consider an appointment if the situation has continued for several weeks, is worsening, affects sleep or daily functioning, or makes another health condition harder to manage. You do not need to wait until it becomes a crisis.

Sources

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