

# Stress

Doctors often tell their patients to avoid stress in order to improve their health. This is usually excellent advice - but how do you go about avoiding stress? Not only are most people unfamiliar with eliminating stress; they are unaware of what stress is in the first place.

The admonition to reduce stress is good because stress is at too high a level in most of us in today's society. The major detrimental effect of stress is that it causes a glandular imbalance, which in turn causes an imbalance of the autonomic nerve system. The autonomic nerve system is the system that controls your organs and glands.

You develop symptoms as a result of stress either directly or indirectly. The direct effect of stress is through the "fight or flight" mechanism within the body. This mechanism is a natural activity of the body which gives you the ability to handle problem situations. It does just exactly what its name implies. It gives you the ability to fight a situation, or to run from it.

A classic example of "fight or flight" is the early man walking through the jungle who sees a saber-toothed tiger. He either has to fight the tiger or run from it. The adrenal gland is important in the "fight or flight" mechanism. It causes an increased blood sugar for better muscle energy and thinking power, an increased heart rate and higher blood pressure to circulate energy-giving sugar and oxygen through the body, an increased respiration, and other activities to give more power and thinking ability. Under normal circumstances, the man would run from the tiger and, hopefully, escape. He would hide somewhere, and high levels of blood would be pumped through his adrenal glands, thus replenishing them. This is a classic example of stress and how the body should react to it - meeting the demand.

Research done by Hans Selye, M.D., in the 1930's, gives us an improved understanding of stress. Selye observed common entities in many different disease processes. He classified this group of problems as the "just being sick" condition. Later he found that this common group of problems, present in many health conditions, was due to stress. He classified three factors that were affected in the body whenever stress was present for long periods of time. He called these the triad of stress. Included in the triad was adrenal gland enlargement, to try to meet the demand of the stress.

Selye's research found many factors which are classified as stress. To understand stress better for our own management

of it, we can divide stress into four basic groups which include most types of stress.

1. **Mental.** When the term "stress" is mentioned, most people think of mental stress. Indeed, this is one of the primary types; however, it isn't the only type. Mental stress can have a very wide scope, from the death of a loved one to a teenager being teased about a pimply face. Emotional stress that is met properly, such as in the example of the fight or flight mechanism, is usually overcome rapidly by the body. In modern society we have many types of emotional stress that are not short-term in nature, and they take their toll on our health. Perhaps the stress is financial - being unable to pay all the bills at the end of the month, having bill collectors phone until we are afraid to answer the telephone. It could be employment which is distasteful, with no advancement or improvement in sight. The type of emotional stress which is most problematic is that which is unrelenting, with few prospects for change.

2. **Physical.** Physical stress can be as simple as not getting adequate sleep, or working too many hours - in other words, driving oneself past the body's endurance. Physical stress also includes structural problems in the body, such as a spinal imbalance or other body distortion. These are especially significant if there is constant pain, because pain itself is a stress to the body. A classic physical stress is an injury such as a twisted ankle, broken bone, laceration, etc.

3. **Chemical.** This form of stress is on the increase in our modern environment. There are three major categories in the chemical phase of stress: **(a) Environmental pollution**, such as emissions from automobiles, factories, pesticides, a furnace leaking gas, etc.

**(b) Contamination and refinement of food supply.** Many of the preservatives, food colorings, and artificial flavorings in modern foods are stresses to the body, and they take their toll. We add to this by eating foods which are concentrated to a high level of imbalance, such as white sugar and white flour. Because of the high imbalance in these food products, heavy activity of the adrenal gland and the pancreas is required to keep the body in balance. **(c) Medications**, both prescription and over-the-counter, are stress to the body and create significant demands upon the stress mechanisms.

4. **Thermal.** When the body becomes overheated or chilled, a stress reaction is set up to meet the demand. An example of this is getting into an automobile which has been parked with the windows rolled up on a hot, sunny day. The body is immediately too warm; air conditioning is blown directly on the individual as soon as the car is in motion. Another

example is sitting in a draft, or stepping outside quickly to pick up the newspaper or mail.

Prolonged stress always affects the adrenal gland. Because the adrenal gland is responsible for many body functions, the symptomatic involvement from stress is great. The problem may be seen as ulcers of the digestive system, severe fatigue, nervousness, moodiness, or inability to think clearly. Since the autonomic nerve system, which controls the organs and glands of your body, becomes imbalanced from prolonged stress, anything controlled by that system can develop symptomatic problems and eventual disease.

Stress is common. Stress causes a lot of health problems. So what do we do about it? Unfortunately there is no way that all stress can be eliminated from the body. Due to the basic fact that stress is cumulative, we must control it by changing the factors which we CAN control. You may have an emotional problem at your place of employment, but that does not mean that you have to run outside without a coat on in 30 degree weather, miss an hour and a half of sleep each night, or indulge in ice cream with its large amounts of preservatives, emulsifiers, artificial flavorings and coloring as well as refined sugar!

Very often a patient will tell a doctor knowledgeable about stress that there has been no stress change in his life – although the doctor can see that the health problem being experienced is the result of stress. Upon questioning, the doctor finds that there is trouble between the patient and his spouse over financial problems. To solve this problem the patient took an extra job which adds an additional four hours to his working day. The job is at a service station at night, and of course he doesn't wear a coat because the job entitles going in and out of the building all the time, and the building is too warm to have a coat on. In order to have the stamina for the extra job, he drinks more coffee and takes stay-awake tablets. When the doctor points out all these factors of stress, he is told, "But I've always gone in and out without a coat!" or "I used to drink coffee all the time," and "While I was a student I used stay-awake tablets", etc., etc. The point is, all of these things may not have been done at the same time – and he was never in exactly this state of health before.

To eliminate as much stress as possible from your life, evaluate the four factors – emotional, physical, chemical, and thermal - to find stressful factors which can be eliminated. Immediately eliminate the easy ones, and then work on the more difficult factors, to lead as stress-free a life as possible. Your health, emotions, and happiness will benefit.

### **Managing Stress**

One thing is certain about stress: there are as many different ideas about stress as there are people who experience change in their lives. Because stress, quite simply, is the way you react – physically and emotionally – to change.

And like change, stress can be either positive or negative. It may be the sense of concentration you feel when faced with a new and challenging situation. Or it may be a continual sense of being geared up and unable to relax. With today's hectic lifestyles, it's no wonder some people think of stress as a way of life, especially after "one of those days." But if stress becomes a constant, ongoing cycle, your health and well-being suffer. The solution? Learn to manage stress and be more in control of your life.

### **Find Solutions**

There are many things in life you simply can't control, but there are very few that you can't learn to manage. Try to identify the situations in life that make you feel stressed and tense (your **stressors**). You may not be able to make them disappear, but you can find creative solutions to the day-to-day problems we all face.

**Avoiding hassles** helps you eliminate the minor irritations that can lead to chronic stress. If rush-hour traffic drives you up a wall, try a carpool or public transportation instead. If rushing to work makes you tense, try getting up an hour earlier.

**Controlling change** is easier than it sounds. When faced with a positive or negative life change, do what you can to limit other changes. If you've become a new parent or started a new career, keep up with things you enjoy – an evening out or special friends.

**Taking a break** puts life in perspective when you're feeling stress overload to the "I-can't-cope" level. Take a few minutes by yourself, sit down, and decide what needs to be done right away and what can wait until later. Take life one step at a time.

**Finding help** is the best solution when you feel overwhelmed, depressed, or unable to deal with stress on your own. Your doctor, employer, or a mental health agency can refer you to a professional to help you understand and cope with your feelings.

### **Learn to Relax**

Stress can be positive when it's balanced with relaxation. Choose a technique that appeals to you, and practice it regularly to unwind and feel calm.

Deep Breathing, the most basic relaxation technique, can be done anywhere, anytime. Sit or stand with your hands on your stomach. Inhale slowly through your nose, feeling your stomach expand. Then exhale slowly through pursed lips, and repeat 3-4 times.

Clearing Your Mind gives you the mental peace to let your worries slip away. First reduce nearby noise and distractions. Then sit comfortably, close your eyes, and

mentally focus on a peaceful image, thought, or word. After 5-10 minutes, you'll feel refreshed.

Stretching loosens the muscle tension that is a natural stress response. Try simple stretches for your back, neck and upper body, like this back stretch: rest your body on your lap, letting your head drop forward. Relax for 1-2 minutes, then slowly sit up.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation helps if you're so geared up you've forgotten what it feels like to relax. Tighten and then relax each of several muscle groups (like your hand or face), noticing how much "lighter" a relaxed muscle feels. It takes about 15 minutes to do your whole body from head to toe.

### **Develop a Positive Attitude and Lifestyle**

A positive attitude helps you approach life – and stress - as a challenge to be enjoyed. Creating a positive mind-set takes practice. One trick is rehearsing for stressful situations: go over the details and see yourself proceeding successfully.

A positive lifestyle – with exercise, sound nutrition, and plenty of rest and relaxation – helps you feel good about yourself and reduce the risk of stress-related illness. Try to slow down, take a breather, and really enjoy your free time.

### **You Can Be In Control**

In today's hectic, fast-paced world, stress is a fact of life. But stress doesn't have to be a way of life. You can be in control by becoming aware of how you feel under stress. Then, by finding solutions to whatever causes your stress, using simple relaxation techniques, and developing a positive attitude and lifestyle, you can manage the stress in your life.