

# Stress and Your Health

## What is Stress?

Stress is anything that puts strain on the body. **Stressors** can be physical and put strain on your body (e.g., very hot or cold temperatures, illness, pain) or psychological (e.g., any situation, event, comment, person we see as negative or threatening). When you sense danger or feel threatened, your body has a stress response often called the fight, flight, or freeze response.

During a stress response, your nervous system tries to protect your body by releasing stress hormones (e.g., adrenaline, cortisol) that make you feel more alert and make your:

- heart beat faster
- blood pressure rise
- breathing increase
- muscles tighten

These physical changes increase your strength and ability to keep going, speed up your reaction time, and prepare you to respond to a stressful event or situation. When your stress response is working well, it can help you meet challenges, stay focused, energetic, and alert.

## Types of Stress

Not all stress is bad. Experiences that create **positive** stress—are just your body's way of telling you that something you're doing is challenging for you (e.g., giving a presentation, learning something new). Positive stress is short-term, it motivates, it has focus and energy on a specific task or thing, it feels a bit exciting—but like you can cope with it, and it improves performance.

Distress stress or **negative** stress may be short or long-term. It can make you feel anxious or concerned, it's unpleasant—making you feel like you can't cope, it decreases your performance, and it can lead to physical or mental problems (e.g., job loss, illness, separation from partner). With self-care, stress reduction, and appropriate support, these stressors may not have negative or long lasting effects on your health.

Long periods of unmanaged stress can become **chronic** and are linked to illnesses such as type II diabetes, cancer, obesity, digestive problems, allergies, asthma, high blood pressure, stroke, and heart attack.

## Stress doesn't always look stressful.

Your nervous system can't tell the difference between big and small threats. If you're emotionally upset about an argument with a friend, work deadlines, or paying bills, your body will react the same as if you're avoiding an accident. If you have a lot of ongoing responsibilities and worries, your emergency stress response may be on most of the time. The more your body's stress system is activated, the harder it is to shut off. One of the most dangerous things about stress is how you can get used to it. It can start to feel familiar, comfortable, or even normal.

## Symptoms of chronic or long-term stress.

### Physical

- Upset or sore stomach
- Digestive problems
- Joint and muscle soreness
- Dizziness
- Headaches
- Increased heart rate
- Chest pain
- Frequent colds or illness
- Weight gain

### Thinking

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

### Emotional

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

### Behaviour

- Low energy
- Sleep problems (e.g., too much or too little)
- Changes in eating habits (e.g., eating more or less than usual)
- Nervous habits (e.g., nail biting, pacing, teeth grinding)
- Withdrawing from others
- Putting off or ignoring responsibilities
- Using alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs to cope

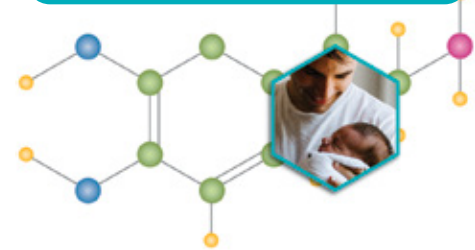


### Did you know?

If your stress level is really high and your body's stress response is always on, your stress response stops being helpful and can start causing health problems.

### Did you know?

Ongoing stress can interfere with reproductive health in both men and women. Properly managing stress before, during, and after pregnancy helps your baby's development and overall health.



### Did you know?

Everyday things such as driving in traffic, waiting in line, or having too much to do can also add to chronic stress and have an impact on your health.

## How can you manage stress symptoms?

Know the warning signs of stress and learn to recognize your own symptoms of stress. When you realize that you are feeling stressed, name what you are feeling (e.g., “I notice that I’m feeling angry.”, “I’m experiencing frustration.”).

### Address stress when it happens.

**Breathe.** Take a breath in and out through your nose. As you breathe in count to 5. As you breathe out count to 5. Do this for 5 or 6 breaths. While you breathe, try feeling an emotion that feels comfortable (e.g., gratitude, peace, calm). To get good at this, practice breathing this way 5 times a day for 5 or 6 breaths for 3 weeks to make it a habit. You can also do this anytime you’re experiencing a stress symptom, it will help calm your nervous system so you can think more clearly.

### Ease your mind.

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

**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 experience them will help you learn how to cope with them better.

**Laugh.** Laughter releases feel good **endorphins** or chemicals. It can increase your intake of oxygen, aid in blood flow, and help relax your muscles. Let yourself smile or laugh, you’ll feel less stressed.

**Practice positive thinking.** Make time to think about things that you feel thankful for. Repeating negative thoughts over and over can increase the harmful effects of stress on your body.

### 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.** Enjoy meals and snacks with family, friends, and co-workers. Taking the time to sit down and enjoy your food is a great way to create connections and relax.

**Intimacy matters.** Make time for your partner. A healthy intimate relationship, considers each other’s emotional and physical needs through open communication, caring, and affection. Emotional and physical intimacy can help lower blood pressure and help reduce stress.

### Relax your body.

**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.

**Be physically active every day.** Adults should do at least 20 minutes per day of moderate to vigorous intensity aerobic activity (e.g., running, cycling, swimming). Moderate to vigorous intensity means that your heart rate increases, your breathing increases, you start to get warm, and might even start to sweat. In addition to doing aerobic activities, try to do muscle and bone strengthening activities (e.g., push-ups, lifting weights, yard work) at least 3 days a week.

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

**Eat well.** Good nutrition fuels the brain and body so you can learn, work, and be active.

**Drink Water.** Your body needs fluid for energy, memory, and focus.

**Get quality sleep.** To do this: go to bed and wake up the same time every day, sleep in a quiet, dark, comfortable environment, dim lights and turn off electronic screens 2 hours before bed, take a warm bath or shower, and avoid alcohol before bed. For adults, 7-9 hours of sleep per night is recommended.

**Get a massage.** Massage therapy may improve blood flow, bring nutrients to muscles, and help remove waste products. It may also produce a relaxation response that can lower heart rate, blood pressure, and decrease the effects of stress.

**Learn relaxation techniques.** Many different relaxation techniques can help decrease the impacts of stress. Learn different techniques and make a regular practice of what works best for you.

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



If you’re having trouble managing your stress or would like to talk to someone about your stress, call the Mental Health Help Line: **1-877-303-2642**

▶ To order a copy of this resource go to:  
<https://dol.datacm.com/>  
Login ID: mentalhealthresources  
Password: mh2016  
Item Number: SR004

For more information about stress, talk to your healthcare provider or go to:  
[www.myhealth.alberta.ca](http://www.myhealth.alberta.ca)  
(search for *Stress Management*)