

Stress

Stress—just the word may be enough to set your nerves on edge. Everyone feels stressed from time to time. Some people may cope with stress more effectively or recover from stressful events quicker than others. It's important to know your limits when it comes to stress to avoid more serious health problems.



Americans reported, on a 10-point scale, a

5.1

in overall stress in 2016, up from 4.8 the previous year.

*American Psychological Association (2017). Stress in America: Coping with Change. Stress in America™ Survey.

how can I cope with stress?

Seek help from a mental health care provider if you feel overwhelmed or unable to cope.

Get proper health care for existing or new health problems.

Stay in touch with your support system. Ask for help from friends, family, and community or religious organizations.

Listen for signs of response to stress like difficulty sleeping, increased substance use, being easily angered, feeling depressed or having low energy.

Set priorities—decide what must get done and what can wait, and learn to say no to tasks.

Note what you have accomplished at the end of the day, not what you've been unable to do.

Avoid dwelling on problems. If you can't do this on your own, seek help.

Exercise regularly—just 30 minutes a day of gentle walking can help boost mood and reduce stress.

Schedule regular times for healthy and relaxing activities, including sleep.

Explore stress coping programs, which may incorporate meditation, yoga, tai chi or other gentle exercises.



what is stress?

Stress can be defined as the brain's response to any demand. Many things can trigger this response, including change. Changes can be positive or negative, as well as real or perceived. They may be recurring, short-term or long-term and may include things like commuting to and from school or work everyday, traveling for a yearly vacation, or moving to another home. Changes can be mild and relatively harmless, such as winning a race, watching a scary movie or riding a rollercoaster. Some changes are major, such as marriage or divorce, a serious illness, a car accident, exposure to violence or poor living conditions can lead to traumatic stress reactions.

how does stress affect my health?

There are at least three different types of stress, all of which carry physical and mental health risks:

- **Routine stress** related to the pressures of work, family and other daily responsibilities.
- **Stress brought about by sudden negative change** such as losing a job, divorce or illness.
- **Traumatic stress** experienced in an event like a major accident, war, assault or a natural disaster where one may be seriously hurt or in danger of being killed.

The body responds to each type of stress in similar ways. Different people may feel stress in different ways. For example, some people experience mainly digestive symptoms, while others may have headaches, sleeplessness, depressed mood, anger and irritability. People under chronic stress are prone to more frequent and severe viral infections such as flu or the common cold, and vaccines such as the flu shot, are less effective for them.

Of all the types of stress, changes in health from routine stress may be the hardest to notice at first. Because the sources of stress tends to be more constant than in cases of acute or traumatic stress, the body gets no clear signal to return to normal functioning. Overtime, continued strain on your body from routine stress may lead to serious health problems such as heart disease, high blood pressure, weight gain/loss, diabetes, depression, anxiety disorder and other illnesses.

how does stress affect the body?

Not all stress is bad. All animals have a stress response, which can be life-saving in some situations. When you face a dangerous situation, your pulse quickens, you breathe faster, your muscles tense, your brain uses more oxygen and increases activity—all functions are aimed at survival. In the short term, it can even boost your immune system.

However, with chronic stress, your immunity is lowered and your digestive, excretory and reproductive systems stop working normally. Once the threat has passed, other body systems act to restore normal functioning. Problems occur if the stress response goes on too long, such as when the source of the stress is constant or if the response continues after the danger has subsided.

Call the Maryland Crisis Hotline at **1-800-422-0009** if you or someone you know is in crisis.

Information adapted from National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) NIH Publication "Adult Stress—Frequently Asked Questions."