



# HOW DOES STRESS AFFECT YOUR HEALTH?



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If I told you that there was *one* thing that you could do to decrease your risk of heart disease, obesity, infection, anxiety, depression, and memory problems, would you do it? Of course, every one of us would go for that magic "cure-all!" The truth is that **stress** is connected with all of those things, and more. So the one thing you can do to decrease your health risks and improve your quality of life is . . . **REDUCE STRESS!**

I am sorry to say that reducing stress may be easier said than done. But if you analyze your own life just a bit, you may find that a few small changes go a long way to a less stressed, healthier you.

## What Is Stress? (from helpguide.org)

Stress is a mental, emotional, and physical response to events that upset our personal balance in some way. When we are faced with a threat, whether to our physical safety or emotional equilibrium, the body's

defenses kick into high gear in a rapid, automatic process known as the "fight-or-flight" response. We all know what this stress response feels like. It starts our heart pounding in our chest, muscles tensing up, breath coming faster, and it puts every sense on red alert.

Small doses of stress can be good for us. Stress keeps you on your toes during a presentation at work, or keeps you studying for your exam. Large amounts of stress, however, can be too much. It can push our mind and body beyond what we are able to cope with. This can affect our overall mental and physical health. This also can happen when any degree of stress occurs over a long period of time (chronic stress).

## What are some of the most stressful events people can experience?

It is important to realize that major life events are very stressful, no matter who you are or

what you do. If you have experienced one of these "stressful events," give yourself credit for the amount of stress your body is under. If you are experiencing more than one stressor at a time, your stress is compounded.

### Top 10 Most Stressful Events

- Death of a spouse
- Divorce
- Marital separation
- Spending time in jail
- Death of a close family member
- Personal illness or injury
- Marriage
- Pregnancy
- Retirement

(From the Holmes and Rahe Scale of Life Events)

## What are some of the most common causes of stress?

One of the most common things I see in my practice as an Obstetrician and Gynecologist is stress associated with daily life, the workplace, and family responsibilities. According to [www.womenshealth.gov](http://www.womenshealth.gov), it is hard to stay calm and relaxed in our hectic lives. With all we have going on in our lives, it seems almost impossible to find ways to de-stress. But it's important to find those ways. Your health depends on it.

## What are some early signs of stress?

Stress drives people to eat too much, sleep too little, skimp on exercise, and shortchange fun. Stress often contributes to symptoms of illness.

## Common symptoms include:

- Headache
- Sleep disorders
- Difficulty concentrating
- Short temper
- Upset stomach



- Job dissatisfaction
- Low morale
- Depression
- Anxiety

During the course of a typical day in my medical practice, at least 50% of my patients complain of one or more of those symptoms.

### What are serious signs of stress?

Being exposed to stress over a long time (sick family member, divorce, etc.) can significantly affect your health. Major medical problems are more likely to occur, and problems that we already have can get worse. Recent research suggests that up to 90% of illness is stress-related. This is due to the physical wear and tear of stress that damages the cardiovascular system and suppresses the immune system.

The list of medical problems that can occur is pages long, but here are some of the most significant:

- Heart attack
- High blood pressure
- Diabetes
- Irritable bowel syndrome
- Infertility
- Asthma
- Arthritis
- Depression/anxiety
- Eating disorders

### How do I reduce my stress?

It is amazing how a few little things can go a long way to reduce your stress and improve your health.

1. **Breathe:** Taking 2 minutes from your busy schedule to do deep breathing can make you feel like a new person.
2. **Write:** Write down your thoughts, to-do lists, and stressors. Make changes to one of them to ease your stress.
3. **Sleep:** Get enough sleep. Most adults need 7-9 hours a night (yes, you too).
4. **Eat:** If you fuel your body right, it will treat you right. Avoid getting tricked into the short-term, low-benefit foods, which are highly associated with sugar and caffeine. Healthy fruits, veggies, whole grains, and protein will sustain you throughout your day.
5. **Exercise:** Physical activity releases endorphins, which are mood elevators. With natural highs like these, who needs stimulants?
6. **Talk:** It is important to have a good support network. Use friends, family, co-workers, and/or a therapist to help you work through your stress.
7. **Set limits:** People may multitask throughout the day. Learn to say no to the things that steal time and energy from you so you can focus on the things that enrich and motivate you.

8. **Be healthy:** Don't deal with stress in unhealthy ways. Stress commonly pushes us toward alcohol, cigarettes, drugs, or overeating. Healthy, low stress living helps us avoid these things.

In our society, we are used to being in control. Loss of control can cause big time stress. The trick in these situations is to make yourself feel, little by little, as though you are really in control. Simple things, like prioritizing, breathing, and cutting back on caffeine, may make you feel like a new person. Why not give it a try?

For more information, contact your health care provider or a therapist. Also, there is great web information out there at:

National Institute of Mental Health:

[www.nimh.nih.gov](http://www.nimh.nih.gov)

American Psychological Association:

[www.apa.org](http://www.apa.org)

National Mental Health Association:

[www.nmha.org](http://www.nmha.org)

American Institute of Stress:

[www.stress.org](http://www.stress.org)

Scan code for these links and more!



### About Robyn Hubbard, MD

Dr. Robyn Hubbard is an OB/Gyn practicing at Grand Rapids Women's Health. Everyday, Dr. Hubbard strives to help women and their families understand health issues and their options for care. Read her full bio at: [www.grandrapidswomenshealth.com](http://www.grandrapidswomenshealth.com).

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