

What happens when you are stressed?

Stress is what you feel when you have to handle more than you are used to. When you are stressed, your body responds as though you are in danger. It makes hormones that speed up your heart, make you breathe faster, and give you a burst of energy. This is called the fight-or-flight stress response.

Some stress is normal and even useful. Stress can help if you need to work hard or react quickly. For example, it can help you win a race or finish an important job on time.

But if stress happens too often or lasts too long, it can have bad effects. It can be linked to headaches, an upset stomach, back pain, and trouble sleeping. It can weaken your immune system, making it harder to fight off disease. If you already have a health problem, stress may make it worse. It can make you moody, tense, or depressed. Your relationships may suffer, and you may not do well at work or school.

What can you do about stress?

The good news is that you can learn ways to manage stress. To get stress under control:

- Find out what is causing stress in your life.
- Look for ways to reduce the amount of stress in your life.
- Learn healthy ways to relieve stress or reduce its harmful effects.

How do you measure your stress level?

Sometimes it is clear where stress is coming from. You can count on stress during a major life change such as the death of a loved one, getting married, or having a baby. But other times it may not be so clear why you feel stressed.

It's important to figure out what causes stress for you. Everyone feels and responds to stress differently. Keeping a stress journal may help. Get a notebook, and write down when something makes you feel stressed. Then write how you reacted and what you did to deal with the stress. Keeping a stress journal can help you find out what is causing your stress and how much stress you feel. Then you can take steps to reduce the stress or handle it better.

How can you avoid stress?

Stress is a fact of life for most people. You may not be able to get rid of stress, but you can look for ways to lower it.

You might try some of these ideas:

- Learn better ways to manage your time. You may get more done with less stress if you make a schedule. Think about which things are most important, and do those first.
- Find better ways to cope. Look at how you have been dealing with stress. Be honest about what works and what does not. Think about other things that might work better.
- Take good care of yourself. Get plenty of rest. Eat well. Don't smoke. Limit how much alcohol you drink.
- Try out new ways of thinking. When you find yourself starting to worry, try to stop the thoughts. Work on letting go of things you cannot change. Learn to say "no."
- Speak up. Not being able to talk about your needs and concerns creates stress and can make negative feelings worse. Assertive communication can help you express how you feel in a thoughtful, tactful way.
- Ask for help. People who have a strong network of family and friends manage stress better.

Sometimes stress is just too much to handle alone. Talking to a friend or family member may help, but you may also want to see a counselor.

How can you relieve stress?

You will feel better if you can find ways to get stress out of your system. The best ways to relieve stress are different for each person. Try some of these ideas to see which ones work for you:

- Exercise. Regular exercise is one of the best ways to manage stress. Walking is a great way to get started.
- Write. It can help to write about the things that are bothering you.
- Let your feelings out. Talk, laugh, cry, and express anger when you need to with someone you trust.
- Do something you enjoy. A hobby can help you relax. Volunteer work or work that helps others can be a great stress reliever.
- Learn ways to relax your body. This can include breathing exercises, muscle relaxation exercises, massage, aromatherapy, yoga, or relaxing exercises like tai chi and qi gong.
- Focus on the present. Try meditation, imagery exercises, or self-hypnosis. Listen to relaxing music. Try to look for the humor in life. Laughter really can be the best medicine.