

Stress

The effect of stress on your body

When you get stressed, your nervous system responds by releasing the hormones cortisol and adrenaline into the bloodstream. This is known as the fight or flight response and it results in certain changes within the body to enable you to deal with stress accordingly. Some body systems, including digestion and the reproductive organs slow right down as they are not deemed essential in stressful situations; whereas other body systems and organs such as your heart and muscular system ramp up as they prepare to deal with the stress. The release of stress hormones causes your heart rate and blood pressure to rise, the blood flow to muscles to increase, your breathing rate to quicken and your senses to become heightened. Stress can also increase the production of stomach acid, stimulate your liver to release more sugar (glucose) into the bloodstream and tense up muscles.

1 The long-term effects of stress

Acute, short-term stress is not detrimental to your health; however, ongoing or chronic stress is unhealthy and has a very negative effect on your body. Having a stressful job, being too busy or overcommitting yourself, experiencing a bereavement, losing your job, overexercising or being in a toxic relationship are all example situations where chronic stress might occur.

Other factors such as a poor diet (one that is high in junk food, sugar, refined carbohydrates, fizzy drinks and caffeine), environmental pollutants (radiation, pesticides, household chemicals) medications/ drugs and vaccinations also cause stress in the body. Certain conditions like allergies, skin complaints, thyroid disorders, fibromyalgia, adrenal fatigue, Crohn's disease and chronic pain also create ongoing stress in the body.

2 Long-term stress can lead to:

- Insomnia and sleep issues
- Tiredness and Chronic Fatigue Syndrome
- Headaches and migraines
- Low mood, anxiety and depression
- Lowered sex drive
- Irregular periods, fertility problems and erectile dysfunction
- High blood pressure and a risk of heart disease
- Digestive issues such as reflux, heartburn, IBS and stomach ulcers
- Weakened immune system making you more vulnerable to viruses and bacteria

3 How to relieve stress naturally

There are many ways you can relieve stress naturally through diet and lifestyle, nutrition and herbal medicine.

- Clean up your diet by cutting out junk food, sugar and refined carbohydrates (bread, pasta, pastries, cakes, biscuits), trans fats (refined oils, fried foods) and highly processed foods. Instead, adopt a plant-based, whole food diet which is full of fresh, organic vegetables and fruit. Vitamin C is an important nutrient to help reduce stress hormones in the body. There is an abundance of vitamin C in fruit and vegetables, as well as antioxidants which are vital for protecting cells against free radical damage.
- Avoid coffee as caffeine amplifies cortisol production (the stress hormone) and reduces melatonin production which is the hormone that promotes sleep. Caffeine can also contribute to anxiety. Try a coffee alternative such as chicory root coffee (caffeine free) or a turmeric latte.
- Magnesium and B vitamins are essential nutrients when the body is under stress. These nutrients are required for cellular energy production, blood sugar regulation and supporting the nervous system to combat stress. Increase your intake of leafy green vegetables (spinach, kale, spring greens), almonds, wholegrain rice, lentils and avocado as these foods provide good sources of magnesium and B vitamins.
- Herbs such as Ashwagandha (also known as Withania), Rhodiola and Siberian Ginseng are known as adaptogen herbs as they help support and “adapt” the body in times of stress. Herbs can be taken as a liquid extract, tincture, tablet or capsule. For best results, consult with a naturopath or herbalist to ensure you are prescribed the correct dose of herbs for your needs.
- Address the issues that are causing you stress, whether that be in your job, your personal life or with your health. If you’re struggling with your workload, speak to your manager about some potential solutions; if your relationship with your partner is strained, talk to them about it or seek professional help; if your health is not what it should be, seek the help of a medical practitioner, naturopath or nutritional therapist. A Health Coach can help you find the cause of stress and light the way to a happier and more balanced life.