



# The Wellness News

## Stress and the Body

### How Stress Affects Your Body

Stress affects everyone, yet the way we feel inside our bodies and the way we express and manage our stress differs from person to person. Some people appear to be calm, but on the inside they feel anxious and tense. Other people outwardly express stress by raising their voice, clenching their fists, or using food or alcohol to feel better. There are many different kinds of stressors. Some stressors build up over time such as always getting stuck in traffic, running late to work, politics, and noise. Others are caused by big events such as losing a loved one, illness, and having a baby. Regardless of the cause, it is important to understand that stress has a large effect on our minds, bodies, and overall health. Read on to learn how stress can affect the different elements of our body, both inside and out.

### Hair

Physical and emotional stress can push large numbers of growing hair into a resting phase, causing hair thinning and hair loss.

### Musculoskeletal

Stress can cause muscle pain, weakness and even a loss of bone density. Where in your body do you feel tension when you are stressed? Common indicators include tight neck or shoulder muscles, tightness in the forehead or jaw, back pain, and also muscle spasms. Find a stretch to target these tight areas, or try a yoga class. A special treat like a massage to relieve minor aches and pains or a hot, candlelit bath at home can go a long way to help you relax.



### Digestive Tract

The “fight or flight” response of stress causes increased blood flow to your brain and other crucial organs and away from your stomach. This shift causes slower digestion which also affects the absorption of nutrients. As a result some people experience nausea, stomach aches, constipation, or gas. Take fifteen minutes for yourself and eat lunch away from your work desk or walk around outside in the fresh air. If you are feeling stressed, try to calm yourself down before eating then focus on slowly chewing each bite. Practicing conscious eating will help ease digestion in times of stress.



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## Lungs

People who have asthma may find breathing more difficult as stress can trigger an asthma attack. People who normally don't have trouble breathing may experience shortness of breath or will hold their breath without even noticing. Take a breath! It may sound simple, but in times of stress we might not notice that we are holding our breath. When we actively slow down our breathing, it automatically sends a signal to the body that everything is okay and you start to feel better.

## Immune System

The immune system weakens and infections become harder to fight when the body is stressed. Make sure to bulk up on your vitamins and minerals, omega 3's, and antioxidants. Eat plenty of fruits and vegetables, make smoothies with an extra handful of spinach or freshly squeezed juice, and drink warm herbal teas. Eating whole grains and lean proteins and following a well-balanced diet will help your body combat stress.

## Hormones

The most commonly talked about stress hormone is cortisol. Cortisol is always present in your body, but during times of stress your body secretes more of it for the "fight or flight" response. Extra cortisol in response to short term stress gives us more energy, heightened awareness and higher memory function. When we are continually stressed and cortisol is being released into the blood at higher levels for long periods of time, negative side effects occur. The result: impaired ability to think, focus and learn; suppressed immune system; high blood sugar levels; high blood pressure; and increased abdominal fat, just to name a few...



## Ways to Combat Stress

- Guided imagery
- Journaling
- Exercise
- Yoga
- Listening to music
- Breathing exercises
- Meditation
- Self-hypnosis
- Getting enough sleep

# ***THE WAY YOU BREATHE HAS A STRONG EFFECT ON YOUR NERVOUS SYSTEM...***

*Shallow and rapid breathing can increase heart rate and elevate blood pressure.*

*Slow, deep breathing that extends far down into your lower abdomen can lower your heart rate and blood pressure as well as help you feel **calmer and more relaxed**.*



## **Breathing Exercise**

1. Lie down on your back or recline in a chair.
2. Place one hand on your chest and the other just below your ribcage.
3. Breathe in through your nose, keeping the hand on your chest as still as possible.
4. Feel your belly expand under your other hand.
5. Gently exhale through your mouth and feel your belly flatten.
6. Repeat for 2 to 20 minutes or until you feel relaxed.

# Quiz: Stress

1. What part(s) of the body is most affected by stress?
  - a. The immune system
  - b. Your brain
  - c. The digestive tract
  - d. All of the above in different ways
2. What is the main hormone relating to stress?
  - a. Epinephrine
  - b. Serotonin
  - c. Cortisol
  - d. Adrenalin
3. What can you do to improve stress levels?
  - a. Drink alcohol
  - b. Yell at your boss
  - c. Go for a walk
  - d. Eat lunch at your desk
4. What foods are recommended to help ease stress?
  - a. Omega 3s
  - b. Fruits and vegetables
  - c. Whole grains and lean proteins
  - d. All of the above

## **Answer Key**

1. D
2. C
3. C
4. D