

How Stress

DAMAGES YOUR HEALTH

Stress changes the way your body functions. It can increase heart rate, blood pressure, breathing rate, blood sugar, and muscle tension. These changes are a part of the body's *stress response*.

The Stress Response

The stress response developed to help our ancestors deal with physical threats. It is made up of 4 stages:

- 1 You perceive a threat. Your body prepares to fight or run away.
- 2 Once the danger is past, your body's systems start to return to normal.
- 3 Your vital signs dip below normal to make up for the extra demands.
- 4 Your body returns to a normal, calm resting state.

In today's world, you may not have the same physical threats as our ancestors. But you may still experience the stress response when you perceive emotional and social stressors. Sometimes, you deal with so many of these stressors that your body is unable to return to a state of rest.

You can become "stuck" in the stress response and never fully relax. This is called *chronic* or *long-term stress*. Unlike acute stress, which is resolved quickly, chronic stress can last weeks, months, or even years.

Effects on Health

Chronic stress is harmful to health. Here are some of the effects of chronic stress:

- Irregular or rapid heart rate
- Chronic high blood pressure
- Shortness of breath or hyperventilation
- Headaches
- Chronic tension and pain in the neck, shoulders, or back
- Buildup of fat in the blood vessels and around the abdomen

Chronic stress can also contribute to serious health problems such as:

- Heart disease
- High blood pressure
- Stroke
- Diabetes
- Cancer
- Depression
- Stomach and intestinal problems
- Chronic fatigue
- Asthma

Stress can also trigger some types of pain or make an existing condition worse. For example, migraine headaches are often triggered by stress. Depression, anxiety, anger, and muscle tension can be made worse by stress.

Your Optimum Stress Level

Determining your optimum stress level will help you manage stress. Your optimum stress level is when you have enough stress to feel challenged and engaged with life, but not so much that you feel exhausted and overwhelmed.

The optimum stress level differs from person to person. When you feel yourself becoming stressed beyond your optimum level, try some stress management skills to reduce your stress. Activities such as journaling, exercise, or relaxation and mental imagery skills can help you avoid the harmful effects of chronic stress.

Ask your health care practitioner if there are any tests, referrals, or treatments that might be helpful to use along with your current treatment plan.

