Stress and Your Body

A generation ago, the idea of a mind-body connection was laughed at in medical circles. Today, however, it's pretty much common knowledge that what happens mentally and emotionally has a significant effect on the physical, and vice versa. So what about stress? Physically, stress isn't always a bad thing. Stress hormones are what help us out in emergency situations, allowing our bodies to move into life-saving action. And it's actually good for us to deal with some stress, to build up a tolerance for stressful situations. The problem comes when we're on overload and become officially stressed out, or have to handle too much stress too often. It's then that stress affects us—quite seriously—in ways we might not always be aware of.

Ways We Physically Pay for Stress

We're all familiar with signs of stress such as nervousness and anxiety, depression, as well as the other ways stressors can upset our state of mind. Here's a look at what stress can do to our bodies:

- **Heart Disease**—Added up, daily stress can lead to heart attacks. Type A personalities have an extremely high risk of developing abnormal heart rhythms, and the normal stress of everyday life negatively affects people already prone to heart disease.
- **Strokes**—Research has found that people who say that they are highly stressed, and even moderately stressed on a regular basis, have a significantly increased risk of a fatal stroke.
- **High Blood Pressure**—Stress hormones cause an immediate rise in blood pressure. While this may not create problems for everyone, chronic stress and hypertension is a deadly combination
- **Lowered Immunity**—Stress hormones compromise a body's immune system so that it is more susceptible to the flu, colds and other infectious diseases.
- **Digestive Problems**—Stress has been proven to reduce the amount of beneficial bacteria in our digestive system, which can lead to indigestion, diarrhea, constipation and other problems
- **Headaches & Muscle Aches**—The most common cause of most headaches and muscle aches? Tension and stress.

- **Changes in Sleep Patterns**—Overstressed people often suffer from insomnia, or feel the need or desire to sleep too much which can be a sign of depression.
- **Sexual Dysfunction**—Any type of psychology-cal or emotional stress can be the cause of temporary sexual dysfunction in both men and women.
- **Hormonal Imbalances**—During stressful times, the mind sends emergency messages which upset the body's natural hormonal balance.

In addition, there are many stress-induced behaviors which can cause physical harm, such as overeating or eating the wrong foods, alcohol and substance abuse, and smoking.

Help Your Body Beat Stress: Exercise

Whether we like it or not, the number one weapon against stress is exercise. For some of us, the thought of adding something else to our already busy lifestyle is stress-inducing in itself. But the fact remains that regular exercise—it doesn't matter what it is as long as it's consistent—helps your body deal with stress for a number of reasons:

- Exercise releases hormones which are a natural anti-depressant, and increase your tolerance to pain.
- Exercise stimulates nerves which help the brain's ability to accurately sense emotions; a clear mind can steer clear of misinterpretation and miscommunication, high-level stressors.

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- Exercise connects to hormones which control the stress response, and improves a body's ability to tolerate stress and changes.
- Exercise gets your mind in shape by giving you a positive place to release frustrations and take a break from your worries; it also leaves you with more energy.
- Exercise can reduce negative thinking and improve your self image—it changes the way you look and feel.
- Exercise improves cardio vascular health—your heart is a muscle and can be strengthened like any other.
- Exercising is a direct hit on stress-induced muscle aches and headaches, and helps to normalize sleep patterns and hormonal imbalances.

Then there are the "regular" benefits of exercise: lowered blood pressure, improved metabolism and cholesterol, increased lung capacity and ability of the body to transport oxygen and waste. All tolled, a more efficient body reacts better in stressful situations. But a word to the inspired: watch yourself when exercising. Being stressed can increase the odds of physical injury if you're not careful!

Eat Right to Fight Stress
It's a vicious cycle: stress is often accompanied by a poor diet. Under stress, we physically need more vitamins and minerals, but the foods that have them aren't the ones we grab. Chocolate, ice-cream and other foods rich in fat and calories are what we crave when we're stressed or depressed, and research has shown that these "comfort foods" actually work—they do make us feel and function better in the short term. However, they're killers in the long run. These are the kind of foods that, especially when eaten under stress, turn into fat

around the middle, and abdominal weight gain is directly linked to increased risk of heart disease and diabetes.

In stressful situations, try to eat foods high in vitamins and fiber: poultry, fish, beans and legumes, low-fat dairy products, whole grains and cereals, and fruits and vegetables. Some studies show that foods in complex carbohydrates—pasta and potatoes— can help reduce stress because they're more slowly absorbed by the body. Don't skip meals. Getting too hungry will only make you reach for the wrong foods when your blood sugar's low. And avoid caffeine, alcohol and stimulants in medicines and beverages.

Calm Your Body *and* Mind
Other ways to physically take control of stress include:

- **Breathing Techniques**—Breathing slowly and deeply automatically relaxes the body.
- **Yoga**—Slow exercising such as yoga connects breath, movement and body control.
- **Meditation**—Find a quiet place to be alone, wherever you are.
- **Relaxation Techniques**—Learn how to *really* relax, physically and mentally.
- **Stretching**—Take time to stretch whenever you find yourself in a tense position.
- **Walking**—Walk around the building instead of taking a coffee break, or get up 15 minutes early and walk around the block before you leave for work.
- **Sleeping**—Make sure you get just a little more sleep than you think you need during times of high stress.

Having a hard time handling stress? Treat your body right and it can most definitely help you.