



## Can stress make you sick? Yes it can, but there are things you can do to prevent it from happening.

### What you need to know about stress

Any problem—or anything that seems like a problem—can cause stress. It can be physical, such as breaking an arm. It can be emotional, such as the stress of worrying about your spouse's safety or of making ends meet to pay your monthly bills. Even watching a movie can cause stress. The body's reaction to stress happens naturally, and can help us cope with a dangerous or difficult situation. But, if stress lasts a long time, it can harm our health.

When you are faced with stress, your body naturally responds with a “fight or flight” reaction—to either defend yourself or run away from the problem. Hormones, such as adrenaline and cortisol, increase your energy, heart rate and blood pressure to pump blood to your muscles. That can be helpful if you need to run away from a dangerous animal or lift a heavy object that fell on a child. But, these hormones can harm you if you are exposed to them for a long time? for example, if the stress is one that doesn't go away, such as the challenges of caring for a spouse who is disabled or of parenting when your spouse is far away for months at a time.

In the long run, the hormones from stress will weaken your immune system, so you can't fight off viruses and bacteria as easily. You might be more likely to develop gastrointestinal conditions such as ulcers and irritable bowel syndrome. You also might develop high blood pressure, stroke, or heart disease. Even wounds will heal more slowly. For example, a study found that women caring for mentally disabled family members took an average of nine days longer to heal from a small surgical wound, compared to other women with the same kind of wound.



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Men and women who spend a lot of time taking care of ill relatives or friends have high cortisol levels and so their immune system is weakened. When men and women who took care of Alzheimer's disease patients were given flu shots, the shots were not as effective in preventing flu as they were for men and women who were not taking care of Alzheimer's patients. This information is important for anyone who takes care of others, whether children or adults. If they don't ask for help when needed, they will not stay healthy enough to take care of themselves or others.

## Coping with Stress

Men and women tend to cope with stress differently. Research shows that the support of friends helps women cope with stress more than it helps men. The support from friends helps enhance the immune system and makes women more resistant to disease. For example, a diagnosis of breast cancer is very stressful, and women with breast cancer who have strong social supports from friends or relatives, tend to live longer than women who don't. Research also shows that the support provided by women is more effective at lowering blood pressure for either men or women, compared to the support provided by men.

Unfortunately, many women have trouble coping with stress. Women are three times as likely to become depressed as a reaction to stress, compared to men.

## What to do? This is what works:

### Exercise!

**Physical exertion releases endorphins, which can make you feel better and boost your immune system. Ideally, you want to exercise for 30 minutes, five days a week to really feel the positive impact. Exercise also helps reduce depression.**

### You are what you eat!

**A balanced diet can help your body respond to stress. Reducing caffeine also can help. People who consume more caffeine (from coffee, tea, chocolate, Mountain Dew, or other foods) have more stress hormones and experience more stress.**

### Get your Zzzzs!

**Adults and kids do best with 8-9 hours of sleep each night, but most of us don't manage to get so much sleep. If we don't, we will be more vulnerable to stress, and stress will then make it more difficult to fall sleep. That's a cycle that is hard to stop.**

### Express yourself!

**Researchers have found that expressing emotions to friends, family members, or within a support group setting, or even writing down feelings, can help reduce stress.**

### Ask for help!

**Remember that you can't always do it all. If you're feeling overwhelmed, seek help from friends, family, a support group or a professional.**

### Less worry — more action!

**Worrying is a part of being a parent and/or caregiver, but try to cut down on worrying about things you can't control and things that aren't that important. If you have a problem, try to work out a solution in small steps. Focus on what you can do, not what might go wrong.**



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