

Beauty, Balance and Breath



The Health Effects of Stress

What are some early signs of stress?

Stress can take on many different forms, and can contribute to symptoms of illness. Common symptoms include headache, sleep disorders, difficulty concentrating, short-temper, upset stomach, job dissatisfaction, low morale, depression, and anxiety.

How do women tend to react to stress?

We all deal with stressful things like traffic, arguments with spouses, and job problems. Some researchers think that women handle stress in a unique way: we tend and befriend.

Tend : women protect and care for their loved ones

Befriend : women seek out and receive social support

Women's bodies make chemicals that are believed to promote these responses. One of these chemicals is oxytocin (ahk-see-toe-sin), which has a calming effect during stress. Women also have the hormone estrogen, which boosts the effects of oxytocin. Men, however, have high levels of testosterone during stress, which blocks the calming effects of oxytocin and causes hostility, withdrawal and anger.

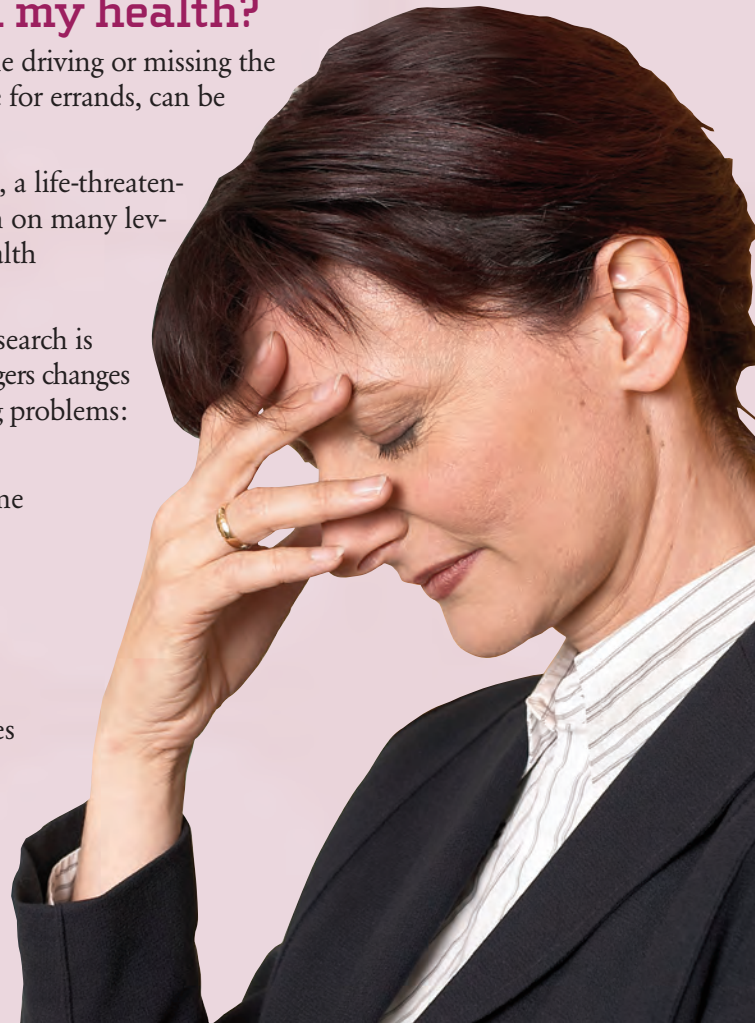
How does stress affect my body and my health?

Everyone has stress. We have short-term stress, like getting lost while driving or missing the bus. Even everyday events, such as planning a meal or making time for errands, can be stressful. This kind of stress can make us feel worried or anxious.

Other times, we face long-term stress, such as racial discrimination, a life-threatening illness, or divorce. These stressful events also affect your health on many levels. Long-term stress is real and can increase your risk for some health problems, like depression.

Both short and long-term stress can have effects on your body. Research is beginning to show the serious effects of stress on our bodies, as it triggers changes and makes us more likely to become sick. It can also worsen existing problems:

- Anger
- Anxiety
- Constipation
- Depression
- Diabetes
- Diarrhea
- Difficulty getting pregnant
- Eating too much or not at all
- Headaches
- Heart conditions
- High blood pressure
- Higher risk of asthma and arthritis flare-ups
- Irritability
- Irritable Bowel Syndrome
- Lack of energy
- Lack of concentration
- Less sexual desire
- Neck and/or back pain
- Sadness
- Skin problems, like hives
- Stomach bloating
- Stomach cramping
- Tension
- Trouble sleeping
- Weight gain or loss



How can I help handle my stress?

Don't let stress make you sick. As women, we tend to carry a higher burden of stress than we should. Often we aren't even aware of our stress levels. Listen to your body, so that you know when stress is affecting your health. Here are ways to help you handle your stress.

- **Relax.** It's important to unwind. Some ways include deep breathing, yoga, meditation and massage therapy. No time? Take a few minutes to sit, listen to soothing music or read a book.
- **Make time for yourself.** Don't feel guilty about taking "me" time. Make it a point to set aside at least 15 minutes each day in your schedule to do something for yourself, like taking a bubble bath, going for a walk or calling a friend.
- **Sleep.** Sleeping is a great way to help both your body and mind. Stress can get worse with lack of sleep—and so can sickness. With enough sleep, you can tackle your problems and lower your risk for illness. Aim for seven to nine hours of sleep every night.
- **Eat right.** Fuel up with fruits, vegetables and proteins. Good sources of protein: peanut butter, chicken or tuna salad. Whole-grains, such as wheat breads and wheat crackers, are also important. Don't be fooled by the caffeine or sugar jolt. Your energy will wear off.
- **Get moving.** Believe it or not, physical activity not only helps relieve your tense muscles, but helps your mood, too! Your body makes certain chemicals, called endorphins, before and after you work out. They relieve stress and improve your mood.
- **Talk to friends.** Time with friends can help you work through stress. Finding a good listener who will let you talk freely about problems and feelings without judging does a world of good. Friends remind you that you're not alone!
- **Get help from a professional if you need it.** A therapist can help you work through stress and find better ways to deal with problems. For more serious stress related disorders, like PTSD, therapy can be helpful. There are also medications that can help ease symptoms of depression and anxiety and promote sleep.
- **Compromise.** Sometimes, it's not always worth the stress to argue. Give in once in awhile.
- **Write down your thoughts.** Ever felt better after typing an email to a friend about your lousy day? Grab a pen and paper and jot down what's going on in your life! Journaling is a great way to get things off your chest and work through issues. Later, read your entries and see how you've made progress.
- **Help others.** Helping someone else can help you. Help your neighbor, or volunteer in your community.
- **Get a hobby.** Find something you enjoy. Make sure to give yourself time to explore your interests.
- **Set limits.** There are only so many hours in the day. When it comes to things like work and family, figure out what you can really do. Set a boundary for yourself and others. Don't be afraid to say NO to requests for your time and energy.
- **Plan your time.** Think ahead about how you're going to spend your time. Write a to-do list. Figure out what's most important to do.
- **Don't deal with stress in unhealthy ways.** This includes drinking excess alcohol, using drugs, smoking or overeating.

SOURCE: OFFICE ON WOMEN'S HEALTH IN THE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES



Get What You Need Out of LifeSM is brought to you by your local Spirit of Women[®] hospital. Spirit of Women is a coalition of hospitals and healthcare providers across the United States that ascribe to the highest standards of excellence in women's health, education, and community outreach.

