

Stressed out?

Are you working long hours and worrying about clients and deadlines? Do you feel pressured and tired because of your demanding job?

If you answer ‘yes’ to any of these questions, then you may be a victim of STRESS!

Work-related stress is a common occurrence, as stress is an unavoidable part of life. A certain amount of stress is useful as a motivating factor; but when it occurs in excess or is of the wrong kind, the effects can be detrimental.

What is stress?

Stress refers to any strain on the body or mind. It usually works on two levels, the physical and the emotional.

Stress in the workplace can be physical as a result of long working hours, late nights, lack of sleep, bad eating habits, too much caffeine, and many other factors that could cause us to ignore our health because of work.

On the other hand, work-related stress can also be emotional in terms of affecting the mind. Tension, anxiety, fear, frustration, approaching deadlines, nagging clients, financial issues, and an annoying boss are all examples of mental stress that can affect the body just as much as physical stress.

What is it doing to me?

Stress is often overlooked as a cause of any illness, but its effects on the human body are sometimes drastic. It is estimated that stress contributes to as many as 80 percent of all major illnesses, including cardiovascular disease, cancer, metabolic diseases, skin disorders and infections. The majority of back problems are also related to stress and it also causes psychological difficulties such as anxiety and depression.

Physically, the body responds to stress with many changes including an increase in blood pressure, acceleration of the heartbeat, more tension in the muscles, dark circles under the eyes, unhealthy skin and hair, slower digestion, increased cholesterol, suppressed immune system, and many nutritional deficiencies.

Am I stressed?

STRESS TEST

- Do you suffer from mood swings?
- Do you find yourself worrying more than you'd like to be?
- Are you irritable and/or tearful?
- Do you feel hostility or anger toward any person or situation?
- Do you have bad dreams?
- Are you acting defensive?
- Do you have difficulty concentrating?
- Are your muscles tense?
- Do you experience aches and pains?
- Are you tired?
- Do you experience sleep disturbances?
- Do you have diarrhoea and/or other digestive symptoms?
- Do you get headaches?
- Are you overeating?
- Are you more forgetful than usual?
- Are you clumsy?
- Do you suffer from depression?
- Are your eating habits deteriorating?

* If you answered ‘yes’ to six or more of the above questions, then you may benefit from some stress management techniques.

What should I do?

The symptoms of stress are our body’s way of asking us to stop what we’re doing and pay attention to ourselves! But it is very easy to ignore these messages and carry on with our activities. If we ignore them, the symptoms may go away, or they may blast louder and louder until we are forced to pay attention, or our bodies will break down.

Many disorders related to stress are not a direct cause of the stress itself, but of nutrient deficiencies caused by increased metabolism during periods of stress. For example, a deficiency in vitamin C usually occurs during stress periods because vitamin C is used by the body during severe or prolonged stressful conditions. During High stress levels, we also tend to choose less healthy and more passive ways of relieving stress like skipping meals, not exercising, binge eating, drinking, and smoking.

Stress nutrients

If you experience stress and have a poor tolerance to it, it is important to maintain a nutritious, well-balanced diet with special emphasis on replacing the nutrients that may be missing. The main nutrients that are depleted during stress include:

- Vitamin C – it is used by the body during stress, so eat more vitamin C-rich foods at times of stress to keep the immune system working properly. Examples of foods rich in vitamin C include Citrus fruits, papayas, green and red peppers, and parsley.
- B vitamins (especially B₅ and B₆) – the need for vitamin B₅ increases during stress in order to support the adrenal glands that release stress hormones. A lack of these vitamins in the body results in symptoms such as fatigue, headache, sleep disturbances and abdominal discomfort. Foods rich in B vitamins include whole grains, legumes (beans and pulses), cauliflower, broccoli, sweet potatoes, and tomatoes.
- Other important nutrients for stress are calcium, magnesium, and zinc. These are abundant in nuts and seeds (especially pumpkin seeds and brazil nuts), whole grains, dark green vegetables, and seafood.

Stress calmers

- Natural raw honey and all complex carbohydrates (e.g. pasta, potatoes, wholegrains, and beans) have a natural calming effect on the brain.
- Onions induce relaxation and drowsiness.
- Magnesium-rich foods, such as whole grains, seafood, nuts and seeds, and some fruits like apples, apricots and bananas.

Stress triggers

- Junk food, sugars and refined foods (e.g. white bread, white rice, etc.) create stress on the system.
- Dairy foods may trigger allergies, and caffeine may trigger panic and anxiety disorders.

Stress management techniques (dietary and lifestyle recommendations)

- Eat a diet that consists of whole grains (for example, wholemeal bread, brown rice, rye, and oats)
- Increase intake of fresh fruits and vegetables during stressful periods
- Include foods rich in vitamin C, B vitamins, calcium, magnesium and zinc

- Include essential oils in the diet from raw nuts and seeds and oils such as flaxseed and sunflower oils
- Avoid all processed and refined foods such as chocolates, junk food, fried food, and sugar and white flour products during stress
- Limit your intake of caffeine and avoid alcohol, and tobacco. While these substances may offer temporary relief from stress, they do not address the problem and just harm your health further.
- Do not skip a meal, and make sure to eat a healthy breakfast daily. If you have a tendency to skip lunch, then make your own healthy lunch at home and pack it for work to eat at lunchtime.
- Get regular exercise. Physical activity can clear the mind and keep stress under control.
- Learn to relax through hot baths, massage, aromatherapy, yoga, meditation, prayer or just listening to music.

<i>Grocery shopping list</i>	
Select from the following food choices on your next grocery trip, to get the most important nutrients needed during stress:	
Citrus fruits, papayas, green and red peppers, parsley, kiwi, grapefruit, brassica/cruciferous vegetables (e.g. cauliflower, broccoli, cabbage), potatoes, tomatoes	Vitamin C
Brazil nuts, pecans, pumpkin seeds, ginger, oysters, poultry shellfish, liver	Zinc
Yoghurt, milk, cheddar cheese, tinned salmon, tofu, broad beans, soya beans, broccoli, almonds, hazel nuts, brazil nuts, sesame and sunflower seeds, sardines, and sprouts	Calcium
Beans, lentils, tofu, soya, avocado, dried apricots, almonds/cashews, peanuts, oatmeal, millet, wholemeal bread, yoghurt, potato, dark green vegetables, legumes, and seafood	Magnesium
Wholegrains, beans, peas, nuts, brown rice, seafood, soybeans, green leafy vegetables, lentils, and brassica/cruciferous vegetables (e.g. cauliflower, broccoli, cabbage)	B-Complex vitamins

Optional:

ABDOMINAL BREATHING EXERCISE

Lie down on your back and relax all muscles. Take a deep breath through your nose. As you inhale, feel your belly expand. Feel the inhalation expand until it fills your lungs to the top. Exhale through the nose by letting your lungs deflate gently. Repeat several times until you feel that your body is less tense.

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