Stress & Health

Long-Term Stress Is Bad For Your Health

Some experts think that stress may cause 50% of all disease. Stress contributes to the first and second leading causes of death—heart disease and cancer. It’s also a factor in migraine headaches, digestive problems, mental illness, chronic insomnia, fatigue, high blood pressure, asthma, allergies, ulcers, tooth decay, and the common cold.

We’re not talking about having one bad day. It’s chronic stress—day in, day out—which can harm your immune system, making you more prone to accidents, illness, and plain old unhappiness.

Many of us have come to accept stress as normal— isn’t everyone stressed out these days? That doesn’t make it okay. Take a look at your stress levels, what causes your stress, and what you can do about it.

For More Information

International Stress Management Association

www.isma.org.uk

MedlinePlus

yourself get to bed at a reasonable hour. A continuing decline, thanks to distractions like e-mail, instant and text messaging, and online shopping. Most adults simply don’t get the recommended 7 to 8 hours of sleep a night. Moreover, some experts predict Get Your Zzzzz’s Set Goals!

Move your bedside clock out of sight, especially if it’s illuminated; Eat a light carbohydrate snack before bed; Keep a cool bedroom—60-65° F is ideal; Don’t use sleep aids containing antihistamines; Get outside in the daylight every day; Avoid caffeine, alcohol, and nicotine in the late afternoon; Program your body clock by going to bed and getting up at the same time every day; Avoid stress, if it makes you think you have—exercising them can significantly reduce your stress. Work It Out!

Exercise is probably the simplest, most popular stress-reliever and antidepressant available. Aerobic exercise for half an hour several times a week does great things for your mood, your heart, and your waistline. It reduces the risk of many diseases and produces endorphins, natural brain chemicals that make you feel good and decrease pain.

The easiest way to get started is with brisk walking outdoors or on a treadmill. As your fitness improves, you may want to try jogging, bicycling, swimming, aerobics classes, or cross-country skiing. See your doctor before starting a fitness program.

Try This!

DEEP BREATHING You can do this almost anywhere, anytime. The trick is to remember to do it! Inhale through your nose as you count to four. Let your abdomen expand. Exhale slowly through your mouth as you count to eight, letting tension leave your body with your breath. Repeat for a minute or two. Your muscles will relax, and your cells will perk up from the extra oxygen. Repeat whenever you feel tense.

YOGA Yoga can improve circulation and memory and lower blood pressure and heart rate. The exercises revitalize your inner organs and stretch your muscles and spine. Most classes combine physical exercises, breathing exercises, and meditation.

PROGRESSIVE MUSCLE RELAXATION Sit or lie down in a quiet place and tense, then relax each muscle group in your body—even your face. Then breathe slowly and deeply for a few minutes. Audio tapes which guide you may be helpful—find them at bookstores.

MEDITATION Sit quietly, close your eyes, and relax your body. Silently repeat a pleasant word like “relax.” When thoughts come, let them go and return to repeating your word. Continue for 10 or 20 minutes. Stop repeating the word. Sit quietly for another minute or two, open your eyes, and feel refreshed.

STRETCHING EXERCISES Tense muscles really appreciate a stretch. Here are a few you can do in a chair.

Fingers: Separate and stretch out your fingers for 10 seconds. Curl your fingers at the knuckles and hold for 10 seconds. Repeat first stretch.

Shoulders: Lift your shoulders toward your ears and hold a few seconds, then relax.

Forearms: Extend one arm straight out, palm up. Gently bend back the extended hand with your other hand.

Neck: Tilt your head to one side and hold for 10 to 20 seconds. Repeat on other side.

Upper Back: Clasp your hands behind your head, elbows out, and squeeze your shoulder blades together for 10 seconds. Relax.

Walking: Nature is truly a great healer, and walking has tremendous health benefits. In a recent study, brisk walking for at least a half hour only six times a month reduced the death rate of participating adults by 43%. To step out into nature and notice the plants and trees is to rejoin the original health club. With no monthly fee!

STRESS MANAGEMENT SKILLS

You certainly can’t eliminate all stress from your life, but you can effectively manage stress with proven techniques and skills.

Adjust Your Attitude

RECOGNIZE WHAT YOU CAN’’T CHANGE If you had the power, you’d change all sorts of things—at work, about yourself and family members, in your community and the world. Sort out which problems you can solve, and which are truly beyond your control. Work on accepting the things you can’t change. Learn to mentally say, “Oh, well. So it goes.”

SET REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS If you find yourself angry at the same situations over and over, maybe it’s time to look at your expectations. A co-worker who is always late with her work is unlikely to change. Can you learn from experience, and plan around her? If your son would rather read than play basketball, can you give up your dreams of him in the NBA? You can save a lot of stress and conflict by being realistic.

REPLACE NEGATIVE THOUGHTS WITH POSITIVE ONES “I’ll never get this right.” Negative self-talk tends to come true—or at least make life a lot harder. Be your own coach. Tell yourself “If I keep at this, I’ll figure it out.” Encourage your family and co-workers—positive attitudes are contagious.

THINK ABOUT THE BIG PICTURE Ask yourself: Will this matter in a year? What do other people do when they have this problem? Is this something time may help?

RECOGNIZE CHOICES We get in the habit of thinking that we have to live with things as they are. But remember: you always have options. Could you speak up, or change things, or say no, or stop? Could you ask someone else to do it? Be your own coach. Tell yourself “If I keep at this, I’ll figure it out.” Encourage your family and co-workers—positive attitudes are contagious.

Get Your Zzzzzz’s Most adults simply don’t get the recommended 7 to 8 hours of sleep a night. Moreover, some experts predict a continuing decline, thanks to distractions like e-mail, instant and text messaging, and online shopping. Mood, memory, and your ability to pay attention and make good decisions take a nose dive as sleep deficits grow. It’s downright dangerous—23% of us admitted to falling asleep at the wheel in the past year. Make yourself get to bed at a reasonable hour.

If you have trouble sleeping, try these suggestions:

› Program your body clock by going to bed and getting up at the same time every day;
› Avoid caffeine, alcohol, and nicotine in the late afternoon and evening;
› Get outside in the daylight every day;
› Don’t use sleep aids containing antihistamines;
› Keep a cool bedroom—60-65° F is ideal;
› Exercise regularly for longer, deeper sleep;
› Remove the TV—reserve the bedroom for sleep only;
› Eat a light carbohydrate snack before bed;
› Move your bedside clock out of sight, especially if it’s illuminated;
› Create a “nesting ritual” at bedtime, perhaps including a warm bath or soft music to prepare you for sleep;
› If you can’t fall asleep after a half hour, get up and leave the bedroom until you feel sleepy, and;
› See your doctor if you have chronic trouble sleeping or are drowsy in the daytime. A diagnosis of the underlying cause is important, and treatments are available.

Set Goals! People can withstand enormous stress for a good cause. Think of the people you admire. Has life always been easy for them? They’ve gotten through the hard parts because they kept their purpose in mind.

On the other hand, life can seem pretty meaningless if you’re just going through the motions, bored and going nowhere.

What are your goals and dreams? Are you moving towards them?

Take an hour and write down your goals, from the most humble to the most important. Think of small steps you could take to move towards what you want. Make plans and follow through. Extra work does not always mean extra stress, if it makes your dreams come true.

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