



URL of this page: <https://medlineplus.gov/stress.html>

Stress

Also called: Psychological stress

What is stress?

Stress is how your brain and body respond to a challenge or demand. When you are stressed, your body releases chemicals called **hormones** [<https://medlineplus.gov/hormones.html>]. The hormones make you alert and ready to act. They can raise your blood pressure, heart rate, and blood sugar levels. This response is sometimes called a "fight or flight" response.

Everyone gets stressed from time to time. There are different types of stress. It can be short-term or long-term. It can be caused by something that happens once or something that keeps happening.

Not all stress is bad. In fact, it can help you survive in a dangerous situation. For example, one kind of stress is the jolt you may feel when a car pulls out in front of you. This jolt of hormones helps you quickly hit the brakes to avoid an accident. A little short-term stress can sometimes be helpful. For example, the stress of having a deadline for school or your job may push you to get your work done on time. Once you finish it, that stress goes away.

But stress that lasts a long time can harm your health.

What causes long-term stress?

Long-term stress, or chronic stress, lasts for weeks, months, or longer. As you go about your life, your body is acting as if you're being threatened.

Causes of long-term stress include:

- **Routine stress** from the demands of work, school, family needs, money problems, and other daily pressures that don't stop.
- **Stress from sudden, difficult changes in your life**, such as divorce, illness, losing your job, or other unhappy life events that often have a long impact.
- **Traumatic stress**, which may happen when you're in danger of serious harm or death. Examples include being in a bad accident, a war, a flood, earthquake, or other frightening event. This type of stress can cause a long-lasting problem called **post-traumatic stress disorder** [<https://medlineplus.gov/posttraumaticstressdisorder.html>] (PTSD).

How can long term-stress harm my health?

People respond to stress in different ways. If you're stressed for a long time you may notice that you are:

- Getting sick more often than usual because stress weakens your body's ability to fight germs
- Having stomach problems or trouble digesting food [<https://medlineplus.gov/indigestion.html>]

- Having trouble sleeping [<https://medlineplus.gov/insomnia.html>]
- Having headaches [<https://medlineplus.gov/headache.html>]
- Feeling sad, angry, or easily upset

When stress keeps going, your body acts as if you're always in danger. That's a lot of strain that may play a part in developing serious health problems, including:

- Depression [<https://medlineplus.gov/depression.html>]
- Anxiety [<https://medlineplus.gov/anxiety.html>]
- Heart disease [<https://medlineplus.gov/heartdiseases.html>]
- High blood pressure [<https://medlineplus.gov/highbloodpressure.html>]
- Diabetes [<https://medlineplus.gov/diabetes.html>] (high blood sugar)

It's possible to get used to the symptoms of stress and not even realize there's a problem. So when there's a lot of stress in your life, it's important to pay attention to how it affects you so you can do something about it.

How can I manage long-term stress?

Simple things that improve your mental health [<https://medlineplus.gov/howtoimprovementalhealth.html>] may be helpful in managing long-term stress, such as:

- **Get regular exercise.** [<https://medlineplus.gov/exerciseandphysicalfitness.html>] A 30-minute daily walk can help you feel better and help keep your immune system strong, so you don't get sick.
- **Try relaxing activities.** You could look for an app or wellness program that uses breathing, meditation, or muscle relaxation exercises.
- **Get enough sleep** [<https://medlineplus.gov/healthysleep.html>] **every night.**
- **Avoid too much caffeine** [<https://medlineplus.gov/caffeine.html>] .
- **Decide what you need to do now and what can wait.** And focus on what you got done each day, not on what you weren't able to do.
- **Ask your family or friends for support.**

When should I ask my health care provider for help with stress?

Get help if you're having severe symptoms for 2 weeks or more, including:

- Trouble sleeping
- Changes in your eating that cause unwanted changes in your weight
- Troubles getting out of bed because of your mood
- Difficulty focusing your thoughts
- Losing interest in things you usually enjoy
- Not being able to do your usual daily activities

Always get help right away if stress is causing you to:

- Have thoughts of harming yourself
- Feel you can't cope
- Use drugs or alcohol more often than usual

Your health care provider may refer you to a mental health professional such as a psychologist or social worker.

NIH: National Institute of Mental Health

The information on this site should not be used as a substitute for professional medical care or advice. Contact a health care provider if you have questions about your health.

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