



## February is Heart Health Month: Stress and Heart Health

When you've got an unexpected bill, a dead car battery or family trouble on your hands, are you like a cartoon character with steam shooting out of your ears? Or a cool cat who manages your stress? Everyone feels stress in different ways and reacts to it in different ways. How much stress you experience and how you react to it can lead to a wide variety of health problems — and that's why it's critical to know what you can do about it. "When stress is excessive, it can contribute to everything from high blood pressure, also called hypertension, to asthma to ulcers to irritable bowel syndrome," said Ernesto L. Schiffrin, M.D., Ph.D., physician-in-chief at Sir Mortimer B. Davis-Jewish General Hospital, and professor and vice chair of research for the Department of Medicine at McGill University in Montreal.

### **Stress and Your Heart**

More research is needed to determine how stress contributes to heart disease — the leading killer of Americans. But stress may affect behaviors and factors that increase heart disease risk: high blood pressure and cholesterol levels, smoking, physical inactivity and overeating. Some people may choose to drink too much alcohol or smoke cigarettes to "manage" their chronic stress, however these habits can increase blood pressure and may damage artery walls.

And your body's response to stress may be a headache, back strain, or stomach pains. Stress can also zap your energy, wreak havoc on your sleep and make you feel cranky, forgetful and out of control.

A stressful situation sets off a chain of events. Your body releases adrenaline, a hormone that temporarily causes your breathing and heart rate to speed up and your blood pressure to rise. These reactions prepare you to deal with the situation — the "fight or flight" response.

When stress is constant, your body remains in high gear off and on for days or weeks at a time. Although the link between stress and heart disease isn't clear, chronic stress may cause some people to drink too much alcohol which can increase your blood pressure and may damage the artery walls.

### **Can managing stress reduce or prevent heart disease?**

Managing stress is a good idea for your overall health, and researchers are currently studying whether managing stress is effective for heart disease. A few studies have examined how well treatment or therapies work in reducing the effects of stress on cardiovascular disease. Studies using psychosocial therapies — involving both psychological and social aspects — are promising in the prevention of second heart attacks. After a heart attack or stroke, people who feel depressed, anxious or overwhelmed by stress should talk to their doctor or other healthcare professionals.

### **What can you do about stress?**

Exercising, maintaining a positive attitude, not smoking, not drinking too much coffee, enjoying a healthy diet and maintaining a healthy weight are good ways to deal with stress, said Schiffrin, who is also the Canada research chair in hypertension and vascular research at Lady Davis Institute for Medical Research. "All those people are doing the right thing," said Schiffrin, a volunteer with the American Heart Association.

Medicines are helpful for many things, but usually not for stress. Some people take tranquilizers to calm them down immediately, but it's far better in the long term to learn to manage your stress through relaxation or stress management techniques. Be careful not to confuse stress with anxiety. If you suffer from anxiety, speak with your doctor a treatment or management plan including whether you need medication. Figuring out how stress pushes your buttons is an important step in dealing with it.

### **When you're under stress, do you:**

- eat to calm down?
- speak and eat very fast?
- drink alcohol or smoke?
- rush around but do not get much done?
- work too much?
- procrastinate?
- sleep too little, too much or both?
- slow down?
- try to do too many things at once?

Engaging in even one of these behaviors may mean that you are not dealing with stress as well as you could.

If your stress is nonstop, stress management classes can also help. Look for them at community colleges, rehab programs, in hospitals or by calling a therapist in your community.

Source: [http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/GettingHealthy/StressManagement/HowDoesStressAffectYou/Stress-and-Heart-Health\\_UCM\\_437370\\_Article.jsp#.Vkn\\_r09Viko](http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/GettingHealthy/StressManagement/HowDoesStressAffectYou/Stress-and-Heart-Health_UCM_437370_Article.jsp#.Vkn_r09Viko)

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