

Stress is the number one killer in the United States.

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Bad Stress?

What Stress Does to You

Faced with pressure, challenge or danger, we need to react quickly, and our bodies release of the “fight or flight” hormones such as Cortisol and Adrenaline. These hormones affect the metabolic rate, heart rate and blood pressure, resulting in a heightened - or stressed - state that prepares the body for optimum performance in dealing with a stressful situation.

With a concrete defensive action (fight response) the stress hormones in the blood get used up, entailing reduced stress effects and symptoms of anxiety. When we fail to counter a stress situation (flight response) the hormones and chemicals remain unreleased in the blood stream for a long period of time. It results in stress related physical symptoms such as tense muscles, unfocused anxiety, dizziness and rapid heartbeats. We all encounter various stressors (causes of stress) in everyday life, which can accumulate, if not released. Subsequently, it compels the mind and body to be in an almost constant alarm-state in preparation to fight or flee. This state of accumulated stress can increase the risk of both acute and chronic psychosomatic illnesses and weaken the immune system of the human body.

Very often, modern stresses do not call for either fight or flight. Nevertheless, the same stressing hormones are released as part of the reaction and this natural reaction to challenge or danger, instead of helping, can damage health and reduce the ability to cope.

Stress can cause headaches, irritable bowel syndrome, eating disorder, allergies, insomnia, backaches, frequent cold and fatigue to diseases such as hypertension, asthma, diabetes, heart ailments and even cancer. In fact, Sanjay Chugh, a leading Indian psychologist, says that 70% to 90% of adults visit primary care physicians for stress-related problems.

Medically, it has been established that chronic symptoms of anxiety and stress can reduce our body’s immune system. It brings about changes in the body’s biochemical state with extra epinephrine and other adrenal steroids such as hydrocortisone in the bloodstream. It also induces increased palpitation and blood pressure in the body with mental manifestations such as anger, fear, worry or aggression. In short, stress creates anomalies in our body’s homeostasis. When the extra chemicals in our bloodstream don’t get used up or the stress situation persists, it makes our body prone to mental and physical

Aging is a natural and gradual process, except under extreme circumstances such as stress or grief. The constant stressors or stress conditions result in a loss in neural and hormonal balance. This loss of balance will cause increased oxidative damage accelerating aging in our body. That’s because, chronic disturbances in body homeostasis ultimately affect our hormone secreting glands, cell repair and collagen in our skin and connecting tissues. Immune and neural degenerative diseases prevent this otherwise inevitable process from following the normal and healthy course of events.

Recent research results suggest that long-term exposure to adrenal stress hormones may boost brain aging in later life.

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Scientists at the University of in Lexington looked at the results of memory tests taken by elderly patients with high levels of the stress hormone cortisol, released by adrenal glands when the body is stressed. That high-level group scored lower than others with reduced levels of the hormone, researchers say.

The level of hormone released apparently affects the total volume of the brain's hippocampus—a major source of recall and memory function, in later life. Researchers found those with high levels of hormone release, had a hippocampus volume 14 per cent less than those with lower levels.

The study results suggest that, “chronic stress may accelerate hippocampal deterioration” leading to accelerated physical and brain aging.

Stress has long been suspected as a possible cause of miscarriage, with several studies indicating an increased risk among women reporting high levels of emotional or physical turmoil in their early months of pregnancy or just before conception. But while a relationship has been noted, researchers didn't know exactly how a woman's stress could cause miscarriage.

In what may prove to be a breakthrough finding, a team of scientists from Tufts University and Greece have identified a suspected chain reaction detailing exactly how stress hormones and other chemicals wreak havoc on the uterus and fetus. Their report, in the June issue of *Endocrinology*, may help explain why women miscarry for no obvious medical reasons and why some women have repeated miscarriages. And it could lead to measures to prevent miscarriage -- medically known as “spontaneous abortion.”

Stress can be very bad both physically and mentally. But not all stress is bad.