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## 7 surprising ways stress can affect your body



Everyone experiences stress, but not everyone experiences it in the same way. While stress may be best known for taking a toll on the mind, sometimes physical symptoms are your body's way of telling you that your brain is under too much stress.

"Patients come in with real physical symptoms, but they aren't caused by any illness," says Loretta Howitt, MD, a psychiatrist at Kaiser Permanente's Los Angeles Medical Center. "Stress is the underlying problem that needs to be addressed."

Whether you have physical symptoms, mental and emotional symptoms, or both, finding healthy ways to manage stress can help you find relief.

### Common physical signs of stress

Even if you don't feel frazzled, your body could be sending you subtle signs that it's time to address your stress. When in doubt, talk to your doctor to rule out any physical health issues. But if these symptoms sound familiar, it's possible that stress is to blame.

#### Dry mouth and trouble swallowing

Stress can slow down the production of saliva, which can cause dry mouth and make it difficult or uncomfortable to swallow.

#### Hair loss

Hair falls out naturally when the hair follicle moves from the growth cycle to the resting cycle. Stress can disrupt this pattern and cause more follicles to enter the resting cycle at once — leading to increased, more noticeable hair loss.

#### Upset stomach

Stress can cause gastrointestinal symptoms of all types, including abdominal pain, heartburn, nausea, diarrhea, and constipation.

#### Muscle aches and pains

Stress can cause your muscles to tense up — and over time, that can lead to pain and soreness in virtually any part of the body. The most common stress-related aches and pains are in the neck, back, and shoulders.

#### Jaw, ear, or head pain

Many people unconsciously clench their jaws or grind their teeth when they're under stress, which can cause uncomfortable tightness or soreness.

#### Lightheadedness and dizziness

Stress can raise your heart rate and cause rapid, shallow breathing, which can make you feel dizzy or lightheaded.

Lack of sexual desire

Over time, stress can disrupt the body's hormonal balance. Along with decreased sex drive, erectile dysfunction, irregular menstrual cycles, and missed periods are also common.

## Self-care for stress management

Regardless of your symptoms, there are simple things you can do to help keep stress in check. These small acts of self-care can go a long way, and they all have positive mind-body benefits in the moment and over time.

### Eat right and stay hydrated

Sounds simple, right? But when you're stressed, these healthy basics can easily fall by the wayside. Take good care of your mind and body by keeping healthy foods on hand, cutting back on sugar and caffeine, and drinking plenty of water. A few small changes in your daily habits can make a big difference in how you feel.

### Prioritize exercise

Physical activity is key to managing stress and improving mental health. And any type of physical activity can help reduce stress. Even better? The positive effects of exercise can be felt immediately, but the stress-relieving benefits become even more noticeable over time. [1]

### Get outside and into nature

Nature is a natural stress remedy. Spending just 20 to 30 minutes in a natural setting can reduce levels of cortisol — the hormone most closely associated with stress — by 20%. [2]

### Explore mindfulness meditation

The practice of mindfulness meditation involves sitting quietly, focusing on your breath, and paying attention to the present moment without drifting into concerns about the past or future. Mindfulness meditation has become a popular way to manage stress and improve overall well-being — and research suggests that it's effective. [3] There's evidence to show that other types of mindfulness activities, such as mindful acceptance, can help protect against stress as well. [4]

### Connect with others

Staying connected with others and keeping relationships strong can help you cope with stress in the moment and become more resilient overall. Whether you've had a bad day or a bad year, reaching out to family and friends can help you through tough times. And the benefits go both ways — the act of supporting someone else can help boost your mood and enhance well-being. When you can't be together in person, catching up with family and friends over the phone, video chat, or even with a text is just as beneficial.

### Get creative

Studies have shown that spending time doing creative activities can help with stress and boost overall well-being. [5] It doesn't even matter what you do — maybe you'll break out the paints, write a story, play music, or knit — as long as it's creative and you enjoy it.

### Choose positive ways to cope

Some things like alcohol, marijuana, overeating, or smoking may feel like temporary fixes. But over time, they can be harmful to your health and cause problems that make stress worse. Developing new, healthier coping strategies can help break this cycle — and provide deeper, longer-lasting relief.

"Try to be aware of how you handle stress so you can make healthier choices," Dr. Howitt explains. "Consider keeping a journal of your habits, so you can understand your patterns. Make a list of positive actions you can take — like calling a friend, going for a walk, or putting on music and dancing."

Ideally, over time, these healthier alternatives will become your new go-to activities for stress relief.

## Finding your path to a less stressed life

Sadly, there's no magic stress solution that works for everyone. You might have to explore several different stress management tools and techniques before you find what works best for you. Dr. Howitt suggests taking it one small, manageable step at a time. "Set achievable goals," she explains. "Small changes can make a meaningful difference in how you experience stress — both mentally and physically."

Practicing self-care is always a good idea, but some people need more support. If something still doesn't feel right — or you have questions about how to manage stress in positive ways — talk to your doctor.

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Managing stress

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[1] Kathrin Wunsch et al., "Habitual and Acute Exercise Effects on Salivary Biomarkers in Response to Psychosocial Stress," *Psychoneuroendocrinology*, August 2019.

[2] MaryCarol R. Hunter et al., "Urban Nature Experiences Reduce Stress in the Context of Daily Life Based on Salivary Biomarkers," *Frontiers in Psychology*, April 4, 2019.

[3] Madhav Goyal et al., "Meditation Programs for Psychological Stress and Well-Being: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis," *JAMA Internal Medicine*, March 2014.

[4] Brian Chin et al., "Psychological Mechanisms Driving Stress Resilience in Mindfulness Training: A Randomized Controlled Trial," *Health Psychology*, August 2019.

[5] "Getting Creative Really Does Boost Your Mood, Survey Suggests," *BBC News*, May 8, 2019.