

Stress - What I Need to Know

Even if you have a healthy diet, there are other factors that can have a major effect on your health and wellbeing. Stress is one important example. Being stressed can cause problems for blood glucose control, weight management and health in general.

What is stress?

Stress is our natural reaction to situations or events that put us under pressure. The feelings we have when high demands are placed on us can lead to stress.

Stress is a normal part of life and, in some instances, it can be good for us (for example by giving us an extra burst of energy to catch a train). However, if we have high levels of stress too often and/or feel unable to cope it can cause health problems.



Causes of stress

Stress can be caused by big life changes. It may be related to family (e.g., having a baby or a divorce), housing (e.g., moving house or having noisy neighbours), work (e.g., unemployment or having a high workload), and/or personal issues (e.g., bereavement, or health or financial problems), for example. It is not just big events which can make us stressed though, it can also build up over time if there are lots of little things going on in your life. Over time, constant stress can take its toll.

We all respond to stress differently, and some people are able to cope with it better than others.

Types of stress

Acute stress is the most common type of stress. Everyone experiences it. It is our immediate reaction to the pressure of things that are happening, or that are coming up. As it is short-term it isn't always negative. As noted before, it can even sometimes have benefits.

Chronic stress occurs when acute stress is not dealt with, causing us to feel stressed for an extended period of time. This type of long-term stress is bad for our health, both physically and mentally. It can contribute to serious conditions such as mental health problems, heart attacks, strokes, high blood pressure, and a weakened immune system.

The effects of stress

Stress responses evolved as a way to deal with immediate challenges, such as to catch food, or to stop us becoming food! This is often referred to as a "fight or flight" response. To do this the body releases stress hormones (e.g., cortisol), which cause blood glucose levels to increase to make sure we have plenty of energy available. As blood glucose levels are raised, insulin levels are also increased.

But because the types of things that cause stress in the modern world are not usually things we can run away from, this extra energy isn't actually used.

When stress is chronic (long-lasting), this means blood glucose and insulin levels can be raised a lot of the time. This has a negative effect on blood glucose control, insulin resistance and weight management; and increases the risk of longer-term health problems.



How would you know if you were stressed?

Symptoms can vary, but some common indicators are listed below.

Common signs include feeling:

- Irritable, aggressive or impatient.
- Over-burdened.
- Anxious, nervous or afraid.
- Like your thoughts are racing and you can't switch off.
- Neglected or lonely.
- Depressed.
- Disinterested.
- Like you've lost your sense of humour.
- A sense of dread.
- Like you are having difficulty making decisions.
- Worried about your health.
- Unable to enjoy yourself.
- That you can't function properly at work or home.

There can also be physical symptoms, such as:

- Shallow breathing or hyperventilating.
- Panic attacks or heart palpitations.
- Problems getting to sleep or staying asleep.
- Having nightmares.
- Sexual problems, like losing interest in sex or being unable to enjoy it.
- Feeling tired all the time.
- Grinding your teeth or clenching your jaw.
- Headaches.
- High blood pressure.
- Indigestion or heartburn.
- Feeling sick or dizzy.

What can you do to reduce stress?

Different things will work for different people, so it is important to find something that works for you. Possible options include:

- Physical activity.
- Massage.
- Yoga.
- Socialising.
- Good sleep.
- Meditation and/or breathing exercises.



Practical tips for reducing stress:

- Make some time for yourself.
- Avoid turning to alcohol, cigarettes or food as a coping tool.
- Take steps to help you feel more organised, e.g., by making a "to do" list and/or prioritising tasks. This can help you to feel less overwhelmed.
- Practice mindfulness, to help you put things into perspective. There are Apps that can help get you started, such as [Headspace](#), [Calm](#), [Smiling Mind](#), [The Mindfulness App](#), and [Insight Timer](#).
- Speak to a supportive friend or family member. Talking about an issue can often help you to feel better about it.

If you are struggling to manage stress, speak to your healthcare team. They may be able to refer you to helpful services, such as to a talking therapy* or a social prescriber.

Further info:

www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/stress/about-stress/

www.nhs.uk/mental-health/feelings-symptoms-behaviours/feelings-and-symptoms/stress/

* You can also self-refer, see www.nhs.uk/nhs-services/mental-health-services/ for more.