

STRESS

We often hear that stress is bad for us. Why is this? And how do we manage stress?

What is stress?

- Stress is a normal psychological and physical reaction to something we see to be threatening - physical, mental or emotional.

How does our body react to stress?

- When our brain perceives a threat it triggers the release of hormones, like adrenaline and cortisol, which increase our heart rate and breathing, cause our eyes to open wider and get our bodies ready to react quickly – to fight or run away (flight).
- Once the threat is gone, the body is meant to return to a relaxed state.

Is all stress bad?

- No – a small amount of stress can be motivating and help us to achieve things.
- Stress becomes damaging if it becomes overwhelming or continues for a long time.

Are there health implications for chronic stress?

- When stress continues for a long period of time, our bodies remain in the flight or fight mod and the stress hormones are constantly released. This contributes to inflammation which can cause physical problems such as: cardiovascular disease such as high blood pressure and stroke, digestive problems such as gastritis, reflux and constipation, obesity, hair loss, menstrual problems, sexual dysfunction.
- It can cause mental health problems such as: depression, anxiety and personality changes.
- It is believed to contribute to some cancers, genetic changes that make our kids less resilient to stress and some chronic diseases.

How do manage chronic stress?

- Get enough sleep – at least eight hours a night. Lack of sleep increases stress.
- Practicing a relaxation technique, such as meditation or breathing exercises, is essential.
- Exercise – especially cardiovascular – can help to move some of the adrenalin or cortisol but it's important not to exercise too strenuously as that releases even more of these hormones!
- Exercises with slow movements, such as tai chi or yoga, or stretching can be very beneficial.
- Socialise with family and friends – sharing a hug can help to release oxytocin which is a feel good hormone and laughing helps to relax our jaws and our shoulders!
- Set aside time for hobbies: create something, read a book, paint a picture, listen to some music. Doing the things you enjoy helps to ease stress.
- Have a massage – massage can help to release tight muscles.
- Acupuncture has a number of treatments that can help chronic stress.

Should you change your diet?

- A diet rich in fresh fruit and vegetables is the best for a stressed body.
- Eat foods rich in magnesium such as spinach, green leafy vegetables, soy beans and salmon to fight headaches and fatigue.
- Drink plenty of water.
- Tea, especially green tea, and camomile is believed to help lower cortisol levels.
- Avoid salt, caffeine, fried foods, alcohol and tobacco – these will all increase stress.
- Stressed people often crave sugar – satisfy the craving with a piece of fruit!