

# Dealing with Stress

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## What is stress?

Stress is caused by a demand on your physical or mental energy.

Many events in your life can be a source of stress such as changing jobs, moving and going through a loss. Every day issues such as driving in rush hour, conflicts with family members or dealing with long line-ups can also cause stress.

Your thoughts about these events determine how you react and create the level of stress you feel. If you usually respond to life's events in a negative way, your health and happiness may suffer.

**Stress is not so much what happens to you,  
but how you respond to a situation or event.**

Since everyone has stress, it is important to learn how to recognize and manage it. Although some medications may help control your response to stress, there are many skills you can learn as well. These are described in this handout.

## How do I know when I am stressed?

Each person has his or her own ways of responding to stress.

### Some physical signs of stress are:

- muscle tension in the jaw, neck, shoulders or lower back
  - headache
  - “twitchy” or “jumpy” muscles
  - trouble sleeping
  - changes in appetite
  - feeling tired all of the time
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**Some emotional signs of stress are feeling:**

- helpless and frustrated
- a loss of control over your life
- anxious or sad
- irritable, touchy, hostile
- worried

**Some changes in behaviour as a result of stress are:**

- eating too much or not enough
- drinking alcohol
- smoking
- outburst of crying or anger
- less interest in sex

**Some changes in thoughts as a result of stress are:**

- decreased memory
- racing thoughts
- poor concentration
- always looking at the negative
- always expecting the worse

The next time you notice any of these responses, it is a good sign you need to improve the way you cope with stress. Each person needs to learn his or her own ways to cope with stress.

Becoming aware of how you respond to the events in your life is one of the first steps to handling stress better. Learning to deal with stress helps reduce the harmful effects it can have on your body.

**What can stress do to my heart?**

Some people deal with stress by drinking or eating too much, or not exercising enough. These ways of coping can increase your risk for heart disease by:

- increasing blood pressure and heart rate
  - increasing bad cholesterol levels
  - increasing chances of getting blocked arteries
  - increasing chances of angina or heart attack
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## Who else is affected by my stress?

Your family and friends may be affected when you are stressed. They also have their own stresses to deal with. Together, you can make changes and learn ways to manage stress. When members of a family and friends work together to make changes, everyone can benefit.

## Ways to deal with stress

**There are 3 ways to deal with stress:**

1. Adapt to the stress
2. Alter the stress
3. Avoid the stress

Each section describes many things you can do to help.

### 1. Adapt to the stress

Stress is part of everyday life. You cannot change the way other people behave but you can learn to respond to the stress in a different way by changing how you think, feel and behave.

Here are some ways to help change your response to stress:

#### **Take time to relax**

There are many ways to relax. Find a quiet place. Read a book, listen to music, meditate or take a long bath. Try to do something to relax at least once a day. You need to take time for yourself.

#### **Deep breathing or belly breathing**

During your day, take some time to clear your mind and think about your breathing. Deep breathing or belly breathing helps your lungs bring in as much oxygen as they can.

Put your hands on your stomach or belly. Take a deep breath in through your nose slowly. Push your stomach or belly out. Blow the breath out slowly through your mouth.

Do this 2 to 3 times to relax. Repeat this throughout the day. You can do deep breathing or belly breathing anytime and anywhere.

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**Clear your mind**

Find a quiet place to sit or lie down. Focus your mind on a single, peaceful thought or image. Spend a few minutes taking this time for you.

**Think relaxation**

- Sit quietly.
- Focus your mind on this sentence “My right arm feels heavy and warm”.
- Repeat this sentence while focusing in turn on your left arm, right leg, left leg, and so on.
- Focus on slowly filling your body with warm water from your toes to your head.

**Progressive muscle exercise**

- Tense your lower leg muscle and see how it feels.
- Release the tension and see how it feels.
- Think about the difference between the two feelings.
- Repeat this exercise with all the major muscles in your body.

**Follow an exercise program**

Regular exercise is a great way to manage stress. Find an exercise or sport you enjoy that is safe for you to do. Some people find it helpful to exercise with a friend.

**Stretching**

Ask a physiotherapist or exercise leader for stretching exercises that are safe for you to do. You can learn to stretch the muscles in your lower back, neck, arms, shoulders, legs and upper back. Do not stretch without advice about the right way to stretch.

**Eat healthy**

Healthy eating can suffer during times of high stress. The combination of stress and poor eating habits can increase your chances of catching colds, flu and other infections. Keeping healthy and well nourished helps you handle stress. See page 7 for more ideas.

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**Plan your activities**

Sometimes you can plan healthy ways to manage stress. For example, when you know you are going to be in a stressful meeting, plan to walk for ½ hour after the meeting. If a friend or relative causes you stress, go to their house for a visit so you can leave when you want to.

Make time for things you like to do such as being with friends and family, gardening, visiting a museum, driving in the country, reading and walking. Remember, not everyone enjoys the same thing. Being with family may be enjoyable for some and stressful for others.

Do things that make you laugh and happy. Read the comics, watch a funny show, learn to juggle or volunteer at something you would enjoy. Laughing takes your mind off stress and is very good for your health.

**2. Alter the stress**

Remove or change the causes of stress.

**Manage time**

For example, if you feel you have too many jobs to do:

- sit down and make a list
- decide on the most important jobs to do
- make a plan
- think about the jobs you can give to someone else to do
- ask for help
- accept help when offered
- talk to a friend, counsellor or spiritual advisor for advice

**Pace yourself**

Pace your activities to save energy. Rest before you are tired. This leaves you more in control. You may also have to learn to say “No”.

**Problem-solve**

When you have a problem, make a list of solutions. You may want to talk to other people to get ideas. Choose the best solution for you

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### 3. Avoid the stress

This is a temporary way to deal with stress. Sometimes you may need to move yourself or get away from the situation that is causing stress.

Here are some examples of how to avoid stress:

- If the family is fighting, leave the room. Listen to music or take a walk.
- A 10-minute “time-out” to take a stroll and clear your mind can help ease tension and allow you to better deal with the situation later.

### Remember ...

Do not expect instant success when you try to lower your stress level.

It takes most people years to create their lifestyles and patterns of dealing with stress. Be kind and gentle with yourself. Learning new skills to lower stress is like learning to walk – only one step at a time and a few trips along the way. You get there step by step.

There are many ways to cope with the stress in your life. You will learn ways that work well for you. It also helps to talk to other people about how they manage stress.

### How do I know when I should talk to my doctor or get help?

You should ask for help to manage stress when you:

- feel completely alone, overwhelmed or helpless
- feel depressed or sad often
- have trouble sleeping and/or eating
- cannot focus
- cry often
- have mood swings

There are people and programs that can help. Talk to your family doctor or health care provider for more information.

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## Tips to eat healthy

### Follow Eating Well with Canada's Food Guide:

- Ask your dietitian or health care provider, or call your local Public Health Department for a copy. You can also get a copy from this website: <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/>
- Eat fruit and vegetables daily. They are full of vitamins, minerals and fibre.

### Limit caffeine if you have sleep problems:

Caffeine is a stimulant and can keep you awake. Avoid taking caffeine products such as coffee, tea, cola or chocolate after 2:00 p.m.

### Keep away from sugar as an instant “pick me up”:

- You may feel the desire for something sweet when you feel stressed or rushed. Eating high sugar foods can cause your blood sugar to swing high and low. The lows can make you feel unwell and unable to finish tasks. Unfinished tasks can lead to more stress.
- To avoid the highs and lows of blood sugar, choose foods high in complex carbohydrate instead of high in sugar. Examples include whole grain cereals, breads, pasta and rice, fruits and vegetables. Have cereal a bar with fibre or a piece of fruit instead of a chocolate bar.
- Remove high sugar foods from your house or office. Sometimes, just the sight of a cookie might cause you to eat it.

### Eat small meals more often than a few large ones:

- Smaller meals are easier to prepare and take less time.
- They fit into a busy day.
- Eating smaller meals more often will also help level out your blood sugars.

**Take a multi-vitamin:**

This will help to cover the nutrients that may be low or missing in your diet. It does not replace a healthy diet.

**Drink alcohol in moderation:**

Have no more than 1 or 2 drinks a day. One drink is equal to:

- 1 beer (341 ml)
- 1½ ounces (45 ml) of liquor
- 5 ounces (150 ml) wine

## Tips for healthy sleeping

Getting enough good sleep also helps reduce stress. Here are some helpful hints:

- Go to bed and wake up at the same time each day.
- Keep the room dark, quiet and at a comfortable temperature.
- Use the bedroom for sleeping and sexual activity only. Move the television and computer to another room.
- Avoid naps. If you need to nap set the alarm for 30 minutes.
- Finish any exercise or activity routine at least 4 hours before going to bed to allow your body to slow down.
- Find a relaxing activity that can help you sleep such as a taking warm bath, listening to music or doing the relaxation exercise on page 4.
- If you think you may have a medical reason for not sleeping such as sleep apnea talk to your health care provider.

You can ask your health care provider for more helpful hints or look up “Sleep Hygiene” on the Internet.