



THE STRESS CONNECTION

While life's pressures and anxieties can reach us all, rampant chronic stress can wreak havoc on your heart health. Managing stress and cultivating a calmer outlook can keep your heart strong.

BY AKANKSHA SINGH

When was the last time you crossed something off your to-do list without adding to it? Between work, family, finances and day-to-day chores, stress and anxiety have become a routine part of our lives. With the lingering pandemic, working from home and what generally feels like an apocalyptic episode of the *Twilight Zone*, it's no wonder people are experiencing unprecedented levels of stress today.

According to a poll of more than 3,000 respondents from the American Psychiatric Association (APA), 80 percent of people are stressed over "global uncertainty" and 87 percent of people are stressed over high grocery and gas prices.

"Stress activates [causes] the release of cortisol and epinephrine," explains Eva Shelton, MD, a resident physician at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston. "Cortisol narrows the arteries, which puts more stress on [them] and causes increased blood pressure, [while] epinephrine makes the heart beat faster." Over time, this puts individuals at risk of high blood pressure and heart conditions. A 2017 study published in *The Lancet*,

imaged the parts of the brain involved with fear and stress and found links between stress and cardiovascular disease. This is especially true for people of color who are already at an increased risk of high blood pressure and heart disease.

WHAT CAUSES SYMPTOMS

"Chronic stress is something many people struggle to effectively handle," says Kerri Masutto, a board-certified internal medicine doctor, adding, "many people look to [unhealthy] coping mechanisms." These may include things like sleeping pills or alcohol to help you sleep, or stimulants to help you wake up or remain focused (such as caffeine, nicotine or the unprescribed use of prescription stimulants).

"Both of these issues, lack of deep restorative sleep and overuse of stimulants can contribute directly to high blood pressure," cautions Dr. Masutto.

Alcohol—the choice of sleep aid for 20 percent of the population—actually decreases sleep quality. According to a 2018 study published in the *Mental Health Journal of Medical Internet Research*, moderate amounts of alcohol (two servings per day for



males or one serving per day for females) decreased sleep quality by 24 percent.

Similarly, explains Dr. Masutto, a lack of exercise and an increase in junk food consumption work together to increase blood pressure while chronically stressed. “[A] lack of motivation or energy for exercise, combined with this increase in sedentary time is another direct contributor to high blood pressure, [while] comfort foods tend to also be something that people reach for when chronically stressed,” she says.

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, nearly 1 in 2 adults has high blood pressure, with less active people having a 30 to 50 percent greater risk of developing high blood pressure.

Additionally, constantly reaching for a bag of chips or a candy bar every time you’re stressed

Studies have found that adults who exercise sleep better, are better at coping with stress, and have better heart health and stable blood pressure.

might not be the way to go. “Using food to change your mood—think high-sugar—or increase your energy [because of their] high caloric, high salt intake [can] have a negative impact on cardiovascular health,” says Dr. Masutto.

While most people know that high salt intake is linked to high blood pressure, sugar in processed foods is a main

contributor of high blood pressure and heart disease too. A 2019 research study published in *Nutrients* found that added sugar (the sort in processed foods, including syrups) was linked to high blood pressure in older women.

HOW TO CALM STRESS

“The sympathetic and parasympathetic systems work in opposition, so actions that can activate the parasympathetic system may help dampen the physiologic effects of stress,” explains Dr. Shelton. The parasympathetic nervous system is what relaxes your body after periods of stress and runs processes like digestion. It’s for this reason that meditating or taking deep breaths “turn on the parasympathetic system and promote calm,” says Dr. Shelton. Essentially, it’s a question of helping

your body realize it’s safe. After all, as cave people, we only breathed deeply and calmly once we were out of harm’s way.

Here are a few steps you can take to lower your stress levels (according to experts). To start, Dr. Masutto recommends identifying the source of your stress. “Unfortunately, chronic stress is not something we can Band-Aid effectively,” says Masutto. “The best thing to do is to cut it out wherever you can.”

On the other hand, if you’re unable to cut the stress off at its source, learning healthy coping mechanisms might be the way forward, suggests



clinical psychologist agrees. “Stress occurs when we believe that we do not have the resources to cope with the challenges we are facing,” says Chamorro. “[By] taking time to outline concrete steps to address the issue, we can highlight that we do have the resources to cope.”

Chamorro also suggests people stop and write down the source of stress when it strikes and engage with it. “Identify two concrete next steps that you can take to address the issue. This will empower you to handle the source of stress in a productive way.”

Additionally, Chamorro recommends getting seven to eight hours of sleep every night in order to improve your ability to cope with stressors. “Adequate sleep can actually decrease cortisol levels and improve your ability to cope with stress,” she explains.

According to the APA, adults who sleep fewer than eight hours a night report higher stress levels than those who don’t. What’s more, stress actually gets in the way of high-quality sleep and creates a “stress-sleep cycle.”

To help with both sleep and stress management for heart health, the experts recommend being physically active. “Exercise releases endorphins, which tells the body [you are] not in danger, and dampens the sympathetic response,” explains Dr. Shelton. Studies have found that adults who exercise

sleep better, cope with stress better and have better heart health and stable blood pressure.

Additionally, suggests Dr. Shelton, “Meditation turns on the parasympathetic system and promotes calm.” Research indicates that meditation helps lower blood pressure, reduces the risk of heart disease and relieves stress.

Lastly, it’s important to note that chronic stress looks different in everyone, so when nothing else is working, it might be time to seek help. “Stress is a normal part of life,” notes Chamorro, “however, if stress is impacting your daily functioning, it is time to seek professional help.” ●

Dr. Masutto. “Often it’s very difficult to let go of unhealthy [coping mechanisms],” she says, “so instead of trying to remove those, try to add [a] healthier [one] first, [before you] give yourself permission to use the less healthy one.”

Dr. Masutto suggests this can be as simple as opting for a flavored water before reaching for alcohol or high-sugar soda. “Many people feel that they experience much of the same satisfaction from the carbonated water that they do with less healthy drinks and can reduce cravings for those drinks.”

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