

Stress Management

What is stress?

Stress is how our body responds to perceived challenges, threats, or pressures.

The stress response is sometimes called the **fight-or-flight response**.

When we perceive a stressful event, the body produces larger quantities of the chemicals cortisol, adrenaline and noradrenaline, which trigger a **higher heart rate, heightened muscle preparedness, sweating, and alertness** - all these factors help us protect ourselves in a dangerous or challenging situation.



When we are in fight-or-flight mode, **non-essential body functions slow down**, such as our digestive and immune systems. All resources can then be concentrated on rapid breathing, blood flow, alertness and muscle use.

When we are stressed the following happens:

- Blood pressure rises
- Immune system goes down
- Muscles become tense
- Heart rate (pulse) rises
- We do not sleep (heightened state of alertness)
- Digestive system slows down
- Breathing becomes more rapid



The Cost of Chronic Stress

The stress response is useful when you have to escape a saber-toothed tiger.

However, when stress becomes *chronic*, it can have a number of negative effects on your well-being, including:



back pain, chest pain, cramps, erectile dysfunction, fatigue, headaches, heart disease, hypertension (high blood pressure), irritability, loss of libido, lower immunity against diseases, muscle aches, sleep problems, and stomach upset.

Coping with Stress

Your primary care provider and behavioral health consultant (BHC) can help you learn new skills and develop an Action Plan to cope with your stress.

Purposeful relaxation exercises can reverse your body's stress response.

Regular exercise releases endorphins, feel-good neurotransmitters that improve mood, and counter the effects of stress.

Practicing **assertiveness skills** can help you address your problems head-on, build self-confidence, and learn to say "no," so that you don't take on more responsibilities than you can reasonably handle.

It is important to **recognize what we have control over and what we do not**.

When we have some control over a situation, we can use **problem-solving skills** to address it.

To the extent that we do not have control over a situation, we can use **mindfulness, relaxation**, and other coping tools to help us **accept** that things are the way they are.

Eating well, getting enough sleep, making time for pleasant activities, and **enlisting social support** are other important ways to manage stress.