



*Better
Together*

Patient information

Stress

Directorate of Cardiology

What is stress?

Stress is the physical, mental and emotional reaction experienced as a result of changes and demands in life. It is used to describe how people feel when they are faced with situations they find difficult to cope with.

What causes stress?

Your body's response to stress prepares it for action and many modern-day situations can cause varying levels of stress.

The body's responses to stress include:

- Muscle tension.
- Increasing blood pressure.
- More rapid, shallow breathing.
- Sweating.
- Feeling more anxious.
- Irritability.
- Intolerance of minor disturbances.
- Feeling jumpy.
- Feeling exhausted all the time.
- Finding it difficult to concentrate.
- Stomach upsets, headaches, a stiff neck or backache.

The body also reacts by the liver releasing sugar, cholesterol and fatty acids into the blood, and increases adrenaline which slows down digestion and affects the immune system.

So, if you are under stress for long periods of time, it can cause health problems.

How to prevent and cope with stress

- Learn to recognise stress
- Learn to relax
- Maintain regular sleep patterns
- Organise your time well by making a list of what you need to do and do the most urgent thing first. Do not take on more than you can cope with, and try and share out jobs
- Take regular exercise. Gentle rhythmic exercise like swimming or walking will help you to release the tensions caused by stress
- Avoid harmful ways of coping with stress such as drinking, smoking or compulsive eating. They may initially seem to relieve stress but, in the long run, they add to it.

Relaxation

Anyone can learn to relax and it can be applied in everyday life. It involves no drugs or difficult exercises, and it costs nothing except a little time and concentration.

There are a number of advantages in practising relaxation, for example, it can help to lower your blood pressure, cholesterol, heart and breathing rate.

Relaxation for beginners

The aim of this relaxation is to teach yourself to relax by moving your joints from positions of tension to a position of ease. This allows your muscles that have suffered continuous tension to relax.

Remember

It is important that you only do the exercises that are comfortable for you.

- Do not push yourself too much as some of the tensing exercises may aggravate some other medical conditions, for example, arthritis or high blood pressure.
- Do not over tense your muscles. Stop if there is any pain or discomfort.

You may exercise either lying down or sitting in a chair. If you are using a chair, remember to sit in a chair where your head is well supported and your feet are flat on the floor. Let your hands rest on the arms of the chair. Try to find a quiet room as noise can often distract you from relaxation.

To begin with, find a comfortable position and close your eyes. Begin by slowing your breathing rate down and taking a deep breath in through your nose and releasing it slowly out of your mouth.

Repeat this four times. Become aware of the fall and rise of your stomach as you breathe.

Consciously slow down your breathing, then breathe in and pause a little before you breathe out. Breathe as normal.

Feet

Point your toes towards the floor – feel the tension in your toes and ankles. Hold that tension, feel it for a second and now let go.

Calves

Pull your toes towards your head – hold it, then let it go. Feel the difference between the tension that was there before and how you feel now you are in a relaxed position.

Knees

Press your knees together. Feel the tension in your thighs as you do this. Hold and then let go. Allow your knees to fall gently apart into a comfortable position.

Bottom

Tense both sides together, feel the tension, hold it for a second and now release. Now feel the difference between the tension that was present before and how you feel now you are in a relaxed position.

Stomach

Pull in tightly, hold it for a second and then release (when doing this try to continue to breathe as normally as possible).

Hands

Make a tight fist with both hands, hold it, then let go.

Feel the difference between the tensed position and now the relaxed one. Now stretch your fingers, make them long, open them out and separate them - feel it, then let it go.

Let your hands rest lightly on your thighs and become aware of the material underneath your fingertips just for a second ... now let that thought float gently away.

Upper arms

Make fists with both hands. Do not clench these tightly; now bring them towards the shoulders. Tense the upper arms, hold it, then relax.

Shoulders

Pull both shoulders up towards your ears, hold them up and then let go. Now slowly drop your shoulders so you feel the stretch in your neck, then allow your shoulders to return to a comfortable position.

Forehead

Close your eyes tightly, feel the tension around the forehead and eyes, now let go.

Jaws

Clench your teeth, hold it and let go. Feel the difference between the tension that was present and how relaxed it feels now.

Once again, take a deep breath in and let it out gently through your mouth. Start to become aware of the tension, which has begun to lift, and how each muscle is now becoming relaxed. Give yourself at least 10 minutes to allow the relaxation to flow over you.

Maintain regular sleep patterns

Different people need different amounts of sleep so unless you feel extremely tired, the amount of sleep you get does not matter.

The following advice can prevent sleep problems.

- Exercise regularly but do not exercise within two hours of going to bed.

- Avoid alcohol, smoking and tea or coffee before you go to bed.
- Have a milky drink.
- Read a book or magazine to distract your mind from the problems of the day.
- Take a warm (not hot) bath.
- Establish a slow 'getting ready for bed' routine, find a comfy position in bed, and breathe slowly and gently as if you are asleep.
- Practise the relaxation techniques.
- If you wake up, do not look at the clock. Instead, write down what is bothering you, make a hot drink and read a book until you feel drowsy.

Further Information

NHS Direct: 0845 46 47

For free advice and information on any health matter, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

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