

STRESS

By: Poonam Patel, BSc, ND

Understanding Stress:

Stress is simply a fact of life - and because of the chronic stresses we face daily, such as getting stuck in traffic, running late for an appointment, or facing deadlines, we believe stress to be a negative experience. In reality, stress can be negative, positive or neutral based on the stressor. A stressor can be almost any disturbance - such as heat or cold, environmental toxins, physical trauma, or even strong emotional reactions, which can trigger a stress response. So what happens to us when we are stressed? Our bodies release adrenaline, nor-adrenaline, cortisol and other stress-related hormones that activate our sympathetic nervous system, and relate to the stress response we feel, including:

- Increased heart rate and blood pressure to increase the blood flow to the brain
- Increased blood sugar to supply more fuel for energy
- Increased blood flow to arms and legs for strength and speed
- Rapid clotting to prevent blood loss from cuts or internal bleeding
- Decreased blood flow to skin and digestive tract

These automatic responses are evolutionary life-saving adaptations to help primitive man's ability to deal with physical challenges for survival. Even though the nature of stress for modern man is not the same, our bodies still react with the same "fight or flight" responses, and typically this response is so mild that it is easily unnoticed or disregarded.

Effects of Stress:

Stress is not always a bad thing. Today we face job pressures, family and health concerns, financial pressures, and time limitations and the way we deal with these various stressors has a lot to do with our mental, emotional and physical health. Normally, we deal with them perfectly well, and our bodies relax automatically. This allows our bodies to heal and prepare physically and emotionally for the next stressful moment. People who lead healthy lifestyles are able to cope with stress in a positive way.

However, when stress is a negative influence, such as from the death of a loved one, it can result in negative emotions such as anger and depression that may lead to other health problems. And sometimes increased stress levels or other factors such as poor lifestyle habits may contribute to some common symptoms we feel, such as:

- Insomnia, restlessness
- Anxiety, irritability, sadness or depression
- Fatigue, difficulty concentrating

- Skin rashes - eczema, psoriasis, hives
- Headaches and migraines
- Heartburn, irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), constipation, diarrhea
- Change in appetite

It is always important to be alert about stress and how it affects our minds and bodies. If stress is extreme, unusual, or long-lasting, the control mechanisms can be overwhelming and quite harmful - so the hormones and chemicals that prepare our bodies for 'fight or flight' can also exhaust our immune systems, affect our blood circulation and sugar metabolism, and increase the risk of serious health problems such as:

- Obesity
- Bowel diseases - such as crohn's and colitis
- High blood pressure, strokes, heart attacks
- Diabetes
- Stomach & Duodenal Ulcers
- Neck or low back pain
- Cancers
- Depressed immune and adrenal function (causing frequent colds/flu).

An estimated 75-90% of all visits to primary care physicians are for stress related problems.

Risk Factors:

Stress affects everyone, of all ages and from all walks of life. However, certain factors such as our physical health, the number of our commitments and responsibilities, the quality of our interpersonal relationships, our support networks, and recent changes or traumatic events in our lives can affect the degree of stress we feel. Some people have a higher-than-average risk for problems related to stress, such as:

- Children, teens, working parents and seniors - who face stressors related to life transitions
- Poorly nourished
- People without adequate social support networks or financial security
- People who have past history of psychiatric problems

Coping Strategies:

Research has shown that releasing stress and learning how to relax promotes a healthier, happier, and more fulfilling life. So what can you do about it? First of all it is important to recognize your symptoms of stress and work towards correcting the cause of stress. Here are some hints that may help once you're ready to deal with your stress:

- ❖ Evaluate your lifestyle and look towards changing your work/family situation, your schedule and your sleeping habits.
 - Take frequent breaks at work or home.
 - Take weekends to relax.
 - Take frequent vacations or mental-health days to recuperate.

- ❖ Use relaxation techniques such as yoga, meditation, deep breathing, or massage.
 - Studies show that people who regularly practice relaxation techniques are able to control their heart rate and blood pressure

- ❖ Exercise regularly as physical activity is one of the most effective stress remedies around! Exercise causes the release of endorphins, which create a sense of happiness and positively affect your overall well-being.
 - Physically fit people are able to handle stress better, and prevent the long-term damaging effects of stress.
 - Play competitive sports as a way to have fun and exercise.
 - Try walking, jogging, swimming, hiking, aerobics, weight lifting or practicing yoga or tai chi.

- ❖ Watch your diet:
 - A diet with a balance of fruits, vegetables, whole grains and foods high in protein but low in fat will help create optimum health
 - Alcohol, caffeine, sugar, fats and tobacco all put a strain on your body's ability to cope with stress - so try to avoid them
 - Replace coffee and alcohol with plenty of water and herbal teas
 - Eat plenty of colourful fruits and vegetables (including blueberries, apples, plums, green leafy vegetables, carrots, peppers, squashes, etc.)
 - Eat whole, natural and unprocessed foods - avoid foods with a lot of preservatives, additives, food colourings/dyes
 - Snack on healthy nuts and seeds (such as almonds, sunflower and pumpkin seeds)
 - Eliminate artificial sweeteners and fats (aspartame, sucralose, hydrogenated vegetable oil)

- ❖ Eat in a relaxing environment, and avoid eating when upset, angry or stressed.

- ❖ Sleep in a completely dark, well-ventilated room for at least eight hours each night.

- ❖ And while doing all this, have some fun, laugh and be with people you enjoy!
Develop a positive and healthy lifestyle to help you manage your stress.

Certain nutritional supplements and botanical products can also be beneficial in dealing with stress and illnesses attributed to it. Your naturopathic doctor can design a unique treatment plan that incorporates nutritional and healthy lifestyle counselling, along with certain vitamins and herbs, which can provide great relief from stress and prevent future illnesses as a result of stress. Further treatment for stress and other health related concerns might also include acupuncture and homeopathic medicine.

Acupuncture focuses on balancing the energy within your body, which can reduce many symptoms of stress including moderating blood pressure, relieving constipation and diarrhea, and enhancing sleep. If you are taking any supplements for stress, be sure to consult your naturopathic health care provider in order to prevent any interactions with other medications you may be taking.

As René Dubos said, "What happens in the mind of man is always reflected in the disease of his body". So take the time to take care of yourself, and work towards a stress-free life!

For further questions regarding stress and your health, please call the clinic at 905-607-0700, or email Poonam Patel, BSc, ND at TenthLine@mississaugawellness.com.