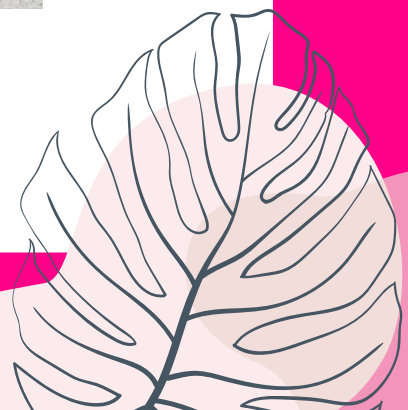


8 Ways Stress Can Affect You

By Stephanie Yap (Rozario)



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Start With Sleep

Stress is a natural physical and mental reaction to life experiences.

Everyone expresses stress from time to time. Anything from everyday responsibilities like work and family to serious life events such as a new diagnosis, war, or the death of a loved one can trigger stress.

For immediate, short-term situations, stress can be beneficial to your health. It can help you cope with potentially serious situations.

Your body responds to stress by releasing hormones that increase your heart and breathing rates and ready your muscles to respond.

Stress Comes In Many Forms

It can be **acute (short-term)** or **chronic (long-term)**.

It can be triggered by an everyday event (eg. a big presentation at work), a traumatic life event (eg. death in the family), or even by nothing obvious at all.

Stress has been linked to cardiovascular disease, depression, and even the common cold.

And it won't always be a conscious thing – in fact, you might be stressed and not even realise it.

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8 Ways Stress Can Affect You

1. Mental Health Issues

Too much stress can lead to major depression in people who are susceptible to the condition. When you have trouble coping with difficult life situations, chronic stress can wear you down and overwhelm you.

This is again due to erratic levels of hormones, including cortisol, serotonin and dopamine, which leads to a persistent stress response that can result in depression.

Neglecting healthy lifestyle practices when you are stressed, such as drinking more than normal and skipping exercise, can also increase the risk of major depression.

2. Neck and Shoulder Pain

When a person is stressed, the body prepares itself to give a stress response.

This response can cause physical changes in the body.

Stress affects the neck and shoulders in several ways:

- ✔ Enlarges the blood vessels in the large muscle groups to allow faster oxygen delivery
- ✔ Causes you to clench and tighten muscle in the neck, jaw and shoulders
- ✔ Increases tension in the muscles that run across the back of your back
- ✔ Restricts neck and shoulder movement
- ✔ Heightens your perception of pain and makes existing pain feel worse

3. Obesity

People who are stressed tend to turn to “*comfort eating*” where they indulge in



foods that are *high in fat and sugar*, in an attempt to make themselves feel better.

This habit of overeating when stress increases the risk of the person developing obesity.

Research has also shown that those with persistent high levels of the stress hormone cortisol weighed more, had a higher body mass index (BMI) and a larger waist compared with those who had low levels of the hormone.

Researchers have long known that rises in the stress hormone cortisol can lead to weight gain. Every time you're stressed, your adrenal glands release adrenaline and cortisol, and as a result, glucose (your primary source of energy) is released into your bloodstream. All of this is done to give you the energy you need to escape from a risky situation (also known as the fight or flight response).

4. Insomnia

Insomnia is difficulty with falling asleep and staying asleep or with overall sleep quality. This occurs despite adequate time allotted for sleep and a comfortable place to sleep.

Persistent stressors, such as problems at work, family difficulties, death of a loved one and major illness can contribute to chronic insomnia.

Short-term stressors can also bring short-term insomnia symptoms. These symptoms would usually be resolved once the stressful situation ends. However, some people may fall into a vicious cycle of sleep loss and daytime anxiety about sleep that snowballs into chronic insomnia.

5. Digestion

We've all experienced that feeling when we're nervous: an upcoming presentation or first-date jitters gives us butterflies in our stomach. Those "*butterflies*" show that our brain and digestive system are directly related. When we're stressed, our stomach is affected too.



“The gut is often referred to as the second brain because it has a nervous system with more neurotransmitters than the brain’s central nervous system,” says **Tracey Torosian, Ph. D.**, a health psychologist who specialises in gastrointestinal health with Henry Ford Health.

“When we’re stressed, our brain activates the sympathetic nervous system. The sympathetic nervous system is our flight-or-fight response: it prepares the body to protect itself against imminent danger by conserving functions that aren’t immediately needed for survival. That includes digestion. The emptying of the stomach is delayed, which can lead to a stomachache, indigestion, heartburn and nausea.”

6. High Blood Pressure

In stressful situations, your body produces hormones like adrenaline, which triggers your fight or flight response. This natural, fear-based response can make your heart temporarily beat faster and work harder.

When your heart beats faster and harder, your blood vessels become narrower, which can lead to high blood pressure.

7. Hair Falling Out

There are three main types of hair loss linked to stress:

1. **Telogen effluvium** –Telogen effluvium is a condition where stress or trauma causes hair follicles to enter a resting phase. Over several months, these hair follicles fall out when washing or combing your hair. However, this condition is not very severe, and the hair tends to grow back after a few months.
2. **Trichotillomania** – Also referred to as hair-pulling disorder, Trichotillomania is a psychological condition in which the individual has a compulsive urge to pull out hair from the scalp, eyebrows, or other parts of the body when under extreme stress or anxiety. Besides stress, this can also be an individual’s way of dealing with uncomfortable, negative emotions such as loneliness, frustration, depression, anxiety, or even boredom.



3. Alopecia Areata – Chronic stress is one of the primary reasons behind Alopecia Areata, a condition that causes bald patches on the scalp. This is an autoimmune condition that occurs when the body's immune system attacks their hair follicles



8. Common Cold

Stress can alter the immune system and result in changes to the ability of the immune system to fight off infections. Changes to the immune system may also result in the release of compounds that are related to inflammation. These changes increase the risk of catching a cold.

People who are under severe, long-term stress (lasting more than a month) are more likely to catch a cold when exposed to a virus than people under milder stress.

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Dealing With Stress

📌 **Do something fun:** Take a day to yourself to do an activity you enjoy, whether it's going for a drive, reading, walking around the block, painting or getting a massage.



- ✔ **Meditate:** Sit or lie down, relax, breathe naturally and focus on what you are doing and how your body moves as you breathe.
- ✔ **Write:** Put down on paper what's bothering you and how it makes you feel.
- ✔ **Exercise:** Exercising lowers stress hormones. Try to find something you enjoy, whether that's dancing, running, swimming, yoga or something else.
- ✔ **Talk:** Try to put your thoughts into words. If you're uncomfortable finding someone you trust to do this with, speak to your doctor about a referral to a therapist.

Whatever you do, don't let stress consume your life.

Reach out to a doctor if you need more advice or tips on how to minimise its impact on your happiness and well-being.

When to See a Professional

If you're in a constant state of fight-or-flight, consider visiting a mental health professional.

Specifically, you should seek help if you experience the following:

- ✔ always feeling “on edge”
- ✔ persistent worry, nervousness, anxiety or fear
- ✔ stress that interferes with daily activities
- ✔ fear of non-threatening situations
- ✔ inability to relax or sleep

A mental health professional can help you determine the underlying cause of these feelings.

Generally, you should seek professional help if you are noticing one or more of these signs and they are:



- ✔ constant or noticeable most of the time;
- ✔ persisting for a period of about two weeks or more;
- ✔ affecting your daily life in a negative way.

A trained professional can create a plan to reduce your stress response, depending on your symptoms and mental health history.

