

The Health Connector

Health Information for
Residents of Public Housing

Stress and Your Health

Everyone's heard the saying, "I'm stressed out!" But do you know what stress is and how it can affect your health? Many adults suffer negative health effects from stress and many visits to family doctors are due to stress-related symptoms.

What Is Stress, Exactly?

- Stress is your body's response to change. Stress can happen for a variety of reasons and affect different people in various ways. A situation that one person finds stressful may not bother someone else. For example, one person may become tense when driving; another person may find driving a source of relaxation and joy.
- Stress can be brought about by a traumatic accident, death, or emergency situation. Stress can also be a side effect of a serious illness or disease.
- There is also stress associated with daily life, the workplace, finances and family responsibilities. It's hard to stay calm and relaxed in our hectic lives. With all we have going on in our lives, it seems almost impossible to find ways to de-stress. But it's important to find those ways. Your health depends on it.

What Are Some Early Signs of Stress?

- Stress can take on many different forms, and can contribute to symptoms of illness.
- Common symptoms include headaches, sleep disorders, difficulty concentrating, short-temper, upset stomach, job dissatisfaction, low morale, depression, weight gain/loss, heart problems, diabetes, high blood pressure and anxiety.
- Stress can affect virtually any part of the body and result in physical, mental, and emotional symptoms.
- Some studies report that 85% of diseases have stress-related factors.

How Do You Respond?

When you are under stress it is hard to stay relaxed. Do any of these behaviors apply to you when you feel stressed? If so, you may not be dealing with stress as well as you could.

- I eat to calm down.
- I speak or eat very fast.
- I drink alcohol or smoke to calm down.
- I rush around but do not get much done.
- I work too much.
- I delay doing the things I need to do.
- I sleep too little, too much or both.
- I slow down.
- I try to do too many things at once.

Are There Long-Term Effects?

Chronic stress may increase the risk of obesity, heart disease, depression, and other illnesses. Long-term stress can also lead to unhealthy behavior, like smoking, overeating, or abusing drugs or alcohol. Also, intense periods of long-term stress may increase the chances of a heart attack or stroke.

What Can I Do?

Don't let stress make you sick. Often we aren't even aware of our stress levels. Listen to your body, so that you know when stress is affecting your health.

10 Tips to Help You Cope with Your Stress

- Try to relax. Some ways include deep breathing, yoga, meditation, or taking a few minutes to listen to soothing music, or read a book.
- Make time for yourself. It's important to care for yourself. No matter how busy you are you can try to set aside at least 15 minutes each day in your schedule to do something for yourself.
- Sleep. Sleeping is a great way to help both your body and mind. Your stress could get worse if you don't get enough sleep. Try to get seven to nine hours of sleep every night.
- Eat healthy and don't skip any meals. Try to fuel up with fruits, vegetables, and proteins. Good sources of protein can be peanut butter, chicken, or tuna salad. Eat whole-grains, such as wheat breads and wheat crackers.
- Get moving. Believe it or not, getting physical activity not only helps relieve your tense muscles, but helps your mood too!
- Talk to friends. Talk to your friends to help you work through your stress. Friends are good listeners.
- Get help if you need it. If stress is starting to affect your health, see a doctor.
- Try to understand where your stress is coming from. Sit down and think about all the things lingering in the back of your mind and write them down. Once you've identified your problem, come up with ideas and plans on how to deal with it.
- Plan your time. Think ahead about how you're going to spend your time. Write a to-do list. Figure out what is most important to you.
- Don't deal with stress in unhealthy ways. This includes drinking too much alcohol, using drugs, smoking, or overeating.

How Stress Affects Diabetes

In people with diabetes, stress can alter blood glucose levels. It does this in two ways. First, people under stress may not take good care of themselves. They may drink more alcohol or exercise less. They may forget, or not have time, to check their glucose levels or plan good meals. Second, stress hormones may also alter blood glucose levels directly.

Scientists have studied the effects of stress on glucose levels in animals and people. The effects in people with type 1 diabetes are mixed. While most people's glucose levels go up with mental stress, others' glucose levels can go down. In people with type 2 diabetes, mental stress often raises blood glucose levels.

Physical stress, such as illness or injury, causes higher blood glucose levels in people with either type of diabetes. For some people with diabetes, controlling stress with relaxation therapy seems to help. It is more likely to help people with type 2 diabetes than people with type 1 diabetes. This difference makes sense. Stress blocks the body from releasing insulin in people with type 2 diabetes, so cutting stress may be more helpful for these people. People with type 1 diabetes don't make insulin, so stress reduction doesn't have this effect. Reducing stress can help people with type 1 diabetes take better care of themselves.

Some people with type 2 diabetes may also be more sensitive to stress hormones. Relaxing can help by blunting this sensitivity. It's easy to find out whether mental stress affects your glucose control. Before checking your glucose levels, write down a number rating your mental stress level on a scale of 1 to 10. Then write down your glucose level next to it. After a week or two, look for a pattern. Drawing a graph may help you see trends better. Do high stress levels often occur with high glucose levels, and low stress levels with low glucose levels? If so, stress may affect your glucose control.

Depression: When the Blues Don't Go Away

Everyone occasionally feels blue or sad, but these feelings usually pass within a couple of days. When a person has depression, it interferes with his or her daily life and routine, such as going to work or school, taking care of children, and relationships with family and friends. Depression causes pain for the person who has it and for those who care about him or her.

Depression can be very different in different people or in the same person over time. It is a common, but serious illness. Treatment can help those with even the most severe depression get better.

What are the Symptoms of Depression?

- Ongoing sad, anxious or empty feelings
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, or helplessness
- Feeling irritable or restless
- Loss of interest in activities or hobbies that were once enjoyable, including sex
- Feeling tired all the time
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering details, or difficulty making decisions
- Not being able to go to sleep or stay asleep (insomnia); waking in the middle of the night, or sleeping all the time
- Overeating or loss of appetite
- Thoughts of suicide or making suicide attempts
- Ongoing aches and pains, headaches, cramps or digestive problems that do not go away



Not everyone diagnosed with depression will have all of these symptoms. The signs and symptoms may be different in men, women, children and older adults.

Can a Person Have Depression and Another Illness at the Same Time?

Often people have other illnesses along with depression. Sometimes other illnesses come first, but other times the depression comes first. Each person and situation is different, but it is important not to ignore these illnesses and to get treatment for them and the depression. Studies have found that treating depression can help in treating these other illnesses. Some illnesses or disorders that may occur along with depression are:

- Anxiety disorders, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), panic disorder, social phobia, and generalized anxiety disorder (GAD)
- Alcohol and other substance abuse or dependence
- Heart disease, stroke, cancer, HIV/AIDS, diabetes, and Parkinson's disease

When Does Depression Start?

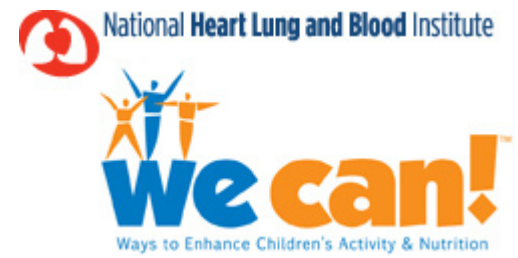
Young children and teens can get depression, but it can occur at other ages also. Depression is more common in women than in men, but men do get depression too. Loss of a loved one, stress and hormonal changes, or traumatic events may trigger depression at any age.

Another Tip

Try this: Deep Breathing to Relax

- Lie down or sit where comfortable.
- Rest your hands on your stomach.
- Slowly count to 4 and breathe in through your nose. Let your stomach rise when you breathe in. Hold this for 1 second.
- Pucker your lips like you're going to whistle. Slowly count to 4 while letting the air out through your mouth.
- Feel your stomach slowly fall.
- Repeat 5-10 times or until calmed.

WE CAN! Ways to Enhance Children's Activity and Nutrition



We Can!™ stands for Ways to Enhance Children's Activity & Nutrition. **We Can!** is a national education program designed for parents and caregivers to help children 8-13 years old stay at a healthy weight. Parents and caregivers are the primary influencers for this age group. **We Can!** offers parents and families tips and fun activities to encourage healthy eating, increase physical activity and reduce sedentary or screen time. This information can be found by visiting the We Can! website at <http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/heart/obesity/wecan/>.

The following information, Eat Well, Live More is from the websites' Live It section. If you visit this section of the website, you will also find information on Good Food that's Good for You, Ways to get the Family Moving, Ways to Wean the Screen, How to Maintain a Healthy Weight for Life, resources, and much more!

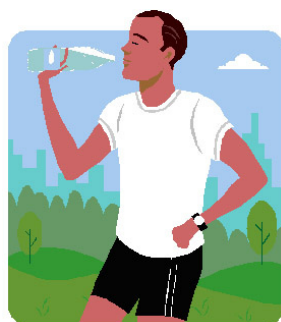
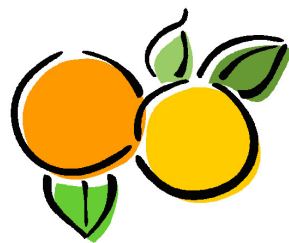
Eat Well, Move More

Today, keeping the balance in life is challenging. We are talking about balancing ENERGY IN (food and drinks we eat) and ENERGY OUT (through physical activity). Keeping energy in balance will help you and your family to maintain a healthy weight and overall good health.

To help your family get on the road to maintaining a healthy weight, here's a list of small steps to eat well (ENERGY IN) and move more (ENERGY OUT) that you or the family can do together to balance your energy everyday. Choose a different "eat well" and "move more" tip each week for you and your family to try. See if you or they can add to the list. Keep track of the tips other people have tried on the **We Can!**™ website.

Eat Well (ENERGY IN)

- Drink water before a meal.
- Share dessert, or choose fruit instead.
- Serve food portions no larger than your fist.
- Eat off smaller plates.
- Don't eat late at night.
- Grill, steam, or bake instead of frying.
- Share an entree with a family member or friend.
- Eat before grocery shopping.
- Choose a checkout line without a candy display.
- Make a grocery list before you shop.
- Serve water or low-fat milk at meals instead of soda or sugary drinks.
- Flavor foods with herbs, spices, and low-fat seasonings.
- Keep to a regular eating schedule. Eat together as a family most days of the week.
- Eat before you get too hungry.
- Ensure your family eats breakfast every day.
- Stop eating when you are full.
- Provide plenty of fruits and vegetables for snacks.
- Provide sliced apples or bananas for your family to top their favorite cereal.
- Serve several whole grain foods daily.
- If entrees are large, choose an appetizer or side dish.
- Ask for salad dressing "on the side."
- Don't serve seconds.
- Try a green salad instead of fries.
- Eat sweet foods in small amounts. Don't keep sweet foods at home so they're not as readily available.
- Cut back on added fats or oils in cooking or spreads.
- Cut high-calorie foods like cheese and chocolate into small pieces and only eat a few pieces. Share among family members for a small treat.
- Use fat-free or low-fat sour cream, mayo, sauces, dressings and condiments.
- Replace sugar-sweetened drinks in your home with water; add a twist of lemon or lime.
- Every time you eat a meal, sit down and chew slowly. Remind everyone to enjoy every bite.
- Pay attention to flavors and textures when you eat.
- Try serving a new fruit or vegetable (ever had jicama, fava beans, plantain, bok choy, star fruit, or papaya?).



Move More (ENERGY OUT)

- Walk your children to school.
- Do sit-ups in front of the TV. Challenge your children to see who can do the most sit-ups in one minute.
- Walk instead of drive whenever you can.
- Take a family walk after dinner.
- Join an exercise group and enroll your children in community sports teams or lessons.
- Replace a Sunday drive with a Sunday walk.
- Do yard work. Get your children to help rake, weed, or plant.
- Get off the bus a stop early and walk.
- Work around the house. Ask your children for help doing active chores.
- Take the dog to the park.
- Go for a half-hour walk instead of watching TV.
- Wash the car by hand.
- Pace the sidelines at kids' athletic games.
- Choose an activity that fits into your daily life. Being physically active with your family is a great way to spend time together.
- Park farther from the store and walk.
- Use an exercise video if the weather is bad.
- Perform gardening or home repair activities.
- Avoid labor-saving devices, such as a remote control or electric mixers.
- Play with your kids 30 minutes a day.
- Dance to music. Play your favorite dance music for your children and have them play their favorites for you.
- Make a Saturday morning walk a family habit.
- Walk briskly in the mall.
- Choose activities you enjoy—you'll be more likely to stick with them. Ask children what activities they want to do.
- Explore new physical activities.
- Acknowledge your efforts with non-food related rewards, such as a family day at the park, lake, or zoo.
- Take the stairs instead of the escalator.
- Swim with your kids.
- Use a snow shovel instead of a snow blower.
- Take your dog on longer walks.
- When walking, go up the hills instead of around them.
- Buy a set of hand weights and play a round of Simon Says with your kids—you do it with the weights, they do it without them.



Personal Story

It was really hard to get out of bed in the morning. I just wanted to hide under the covers and not talk to anyone. I didn't feel much like eating and I lost a lot of weight. Nothing seemed fun anymore. I was tired all the time, and I wasn't sleeping well at night. But I knew I had to keep going because I've got kids and a job. It just felt so impossible, like nothing was going to change or get better.

I started missing days from work, and a friend noticed that something wasn't right. She talked to me about the time she had been really depressed and had gotten help from her doctor. I called my doctor and talked about how I was feeling. She had me come in for a checkup and gave me the name of a specialist, who is an expert in treating depression.

Now I'm seeing the specialist on a regular basis for "talk" therapy, which helps me learn ways to deal with this illness in my everyday life, and I'm taking medicine for depression. Everything didn't get better overnight, but I find myself more able to enjoy life and my children.

Is There Help?

There is help for someone who has depression. Even in severe cases, depression is highly treatable. The first step is to visit a doctor. Your family doctor or a health clinic is a good place to start. A doctor can make sure that the symptoms of depression are not being caused by another medical condition. A doctor may refer you to a mental health professional.



The Facts About Men and Depression

An estimated six million men in the United States have a depressive disorder-major depression, dysthymia (chronic, less severe depression), or bipolar disorder (manic-depressive illness)-every year. Although these illnesses are highly treatable, many men do not recognize, acknowledge, or seek help for their depression. While both men and women may develop the standard symptoms of depression, they often experience depression differently and may have different ways of coping. Men may be more willing to report fatigue, irritability, loss of interest in work or hobbies, and sleep disturbances rather than feelings of sadness, worthlessness, and excessive guilt, which are commonly associated with depression in women. Also, tragically, four times as many men as women die by suicide, even though women make more suicide attempts during their lives. The truth is, depression is a real and treatable illness. It can strike at any age, from childhood into late life. With proper diagnosis and treatment, the vast majority of men with depression can be helped.

What Makes Depression Different for Men?

Depression is a serious medical condition that involves the body, mood, and thoughts. It affects how you eat and sleep. It alters your self-perception. It changes the way you think and feel. Men with a depressive illness can't just "snap out of it" or "pull themselves together," because depression isn't the same as a passing mood. Left untreated, depression may last for weeks, months, or years at a time.

Depressive illnesses can make routine tasks unbearably difficult. Pleasures that make life worth living - watching a football game or playing with children - can be drained of joy. Depression brings pain and disruption not only to the person who has it, but also to his family and others who care about him.

If you are experiencing some of the following symptoms, you may have a depressive illness.

- Ask yourself if you are feeling: sad or "empty"; irritable or angry; guilty or worthless; pessimistic or hopeless; tired or "slowed down"; restless or agitated; like no one cares about you; or like life is not worth living.
- You may also: sleep more or less than usual; eat more or less than usual; have persistent headaches, stomachaches or chronic pain; have trouble concentrating, remembering things or making decisions; lose interest in work or hobbies; or lose interest in sex.

If these symptoms are familiar, it's time to talk with your doctor. Depression is a real, medical illness that can be successfully treated, most often with medication, psychotherapy ("talk" therapy), or a combination of both. Support from family and friends plays an important role as well.



It Takes Courage to Ask for Help

The feelings and behaviors that are part of depression can hinder a person's ability to seek help. In addition, men in particular may find it difficult to admit depressive symptoms and ask for help. It's important to remember, however, that depression is a real, treatable illness and is nothing to be ashamed about.

If you are feeling depressed, tell someone about your symptoms. Speak with a doctor, nurse, psychologist, social worker, or employee assistance professional. Asking for help takes courage, but it can make all the difference.

This information was adapted from How Does Stress Affect You and How Can I Manage Stress?, the American Heart Association; from Stress and Your Health, the National Women's Health Information Center, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; from Stress – All About Diabetes, the American Diabetes Association and Depression, the National Institute of Mental Health, National Institutes of Health.

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