

Can you really be scared to death?

November 8 2010, By William Weir

We like a good fright, but can you actually be scared to death?

It turns out that, yes, a good-enough scare can be the cause your demise - but probably not if you're of normal health.

"If it were to happen it would be someone with a precondition, a weak heart or an aneurysm in the brain," says Brian J. Hurlbut, who teaches psychology at Southern Connecticut State University. "When you're scared, and scared badly, a part of the nervous system - the [sympathetic nervous system](#) - prepares your body for violent activity..." It's what's commonly known as the fight-or-flight reflex.

There have been cases in which criminals have been charged with murder or manslaughter because their victims died from heart attacks. But [death](#) certificates aren't likely to reflect that.

"I rather doubt that a physician would write out 'scared to death'," Hurlbut says.

When there's a sudden threat of danger, your system "dumps adrenaline into your bloodstream," so that it goes to your muscles. At the same time, blood vessels in the skin and [digestive system](#) constrict so that blood will also be directed to your muscles. That's partly why people lose their appetite when they're nervous or scared.

What happens in the body while watching a horror movie or finding your way through a haunted house is similar to what happens during [physical](#)

exertion - for instance, long-distance running. Once the threat has diminished, the part of our bodies known as the parasympathetic nervous system then brings everything back into order. But for those in weakened condition, the damage may have already been done by the time the danger has gone away.

"People do die of overexertion, but usually they have a pre-existing condition that no one knew about," he says. "There's the force on their body, the extra effort and the pressures can cause some weakened part of the body to give out."

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