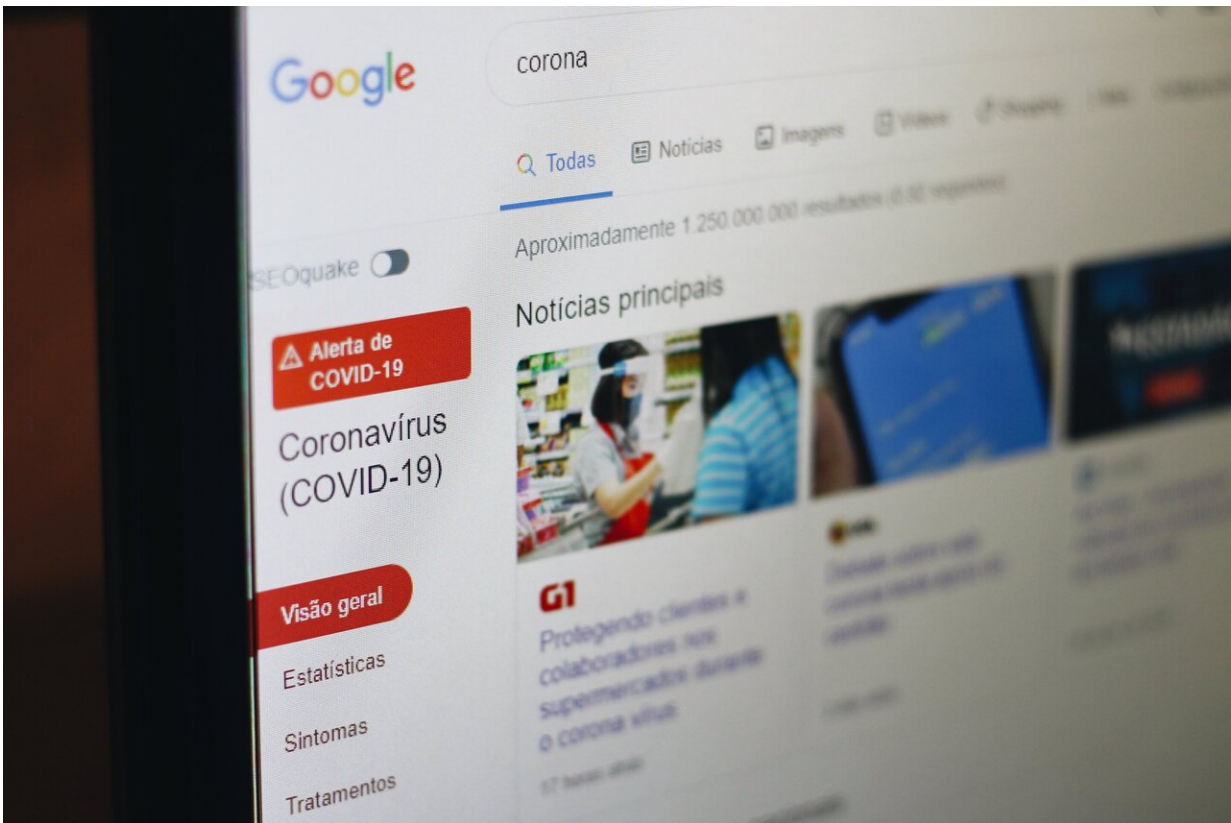


For the sake of your heart, cut down on the news

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With a pandemic that is still raging and threats of violence leading up to President-Elect Joe Biden's inauguration, Americans are likely feeling even more stress than they felt in an American Psychological

Association study published in October 2020. This type of cumulative stress can lead to anxiety and depression, which can have long-lasting effects on one's physical health, say Northwestern Medicine experts.

"As a practicing preventive cardiologist, one of the most common risk factors for heart disease that I am seeing this year is stress," said Dr. Sadiya Khan, assistant professor of cardiology and epidemiology at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine and a Northwestern Medicine physician. "I know we can all agree it has been an extremely stressful year for all in every aspect of our lives, including stress related to the pandemic and associated health, financial and political events."

"It's possible and easy to find yourself getting news updates every single minute of the day, which is just exposing yourself to repeated layers of stress throughout the day," said Dr. Aderonke Pederson, instructor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine and a Northwestern Medicine psychiatrist. "A lot of us in our field recommend people absorb the news in doses. Tell yourself I'm only going to look at the news once or twice a day and only rely on these two reliable sources. This will help manage your mental input because our brains can only handle so much. A lot of times we're absorbing it without even knowing it, such as tension in our muscles."

The impact of stress on physical health

"We know that higher levels of stress can keep us in a fight or flight mode, which results in production of extra cortisol, meaning your body is constantly triggered," Pederson said. "That cumulative stress can translate into increased risks of heart problems, diabetes and more. Mental illnesses like depression and anxiety, especially when untreated, can increase your risk for chronic health conditions like diabetes, cardiac events and heart disease and can complicate symptoms of asthma. So

there's a feedback loop of mental health conditions and [physical health](#) conditions."

Coping strategies to reduce stress

"To reduce the consequences of stress, try to focus on heart-healthy behaviors that can reduce your risk, such as exercising, enjoying a [healthy diet](#) and finding ways to maintain a positive attitude," Khan said. "If you already have risk factors for [heart disease](#), it's important to check in with your doctor to make sure stress is not making it worse."

"You should also make time to rest your body by getting good sleep and not engaging in too many activities before bedtime," Pederson said. "Find ways to delete those layers of stressful input by turning off the news, not checking work email. Calm your mind a couple hours before bed by reading a lighthearted book, journaling, playing a game or taking a warm bath."

'For Black people, current political issues are multiplied'

"Black people have disproportionately died from COVID-19, lost [family members](#) and are sitting in the confluence of multiple disparities related to health care and economic inequities," Pederson said. "Discrimination exacerbates the risk of mental and physical health issues. African-Americans are less likely to be offered services and treatments for mental health issues, experience stigma related to mental health and tend to delay seeking care, so it's a multi-fold problem."

How to help others you see struggling

"Do those you love appear overwhelmed? More fatigued? More

irritable? More isolated? Those are signs of [stress](#)," Pederson said. "Check in on your family members and encourage them to engage in activities that would be beneficial or would be rewarding for them. Sometimes we may even have to encourage our family to seek help in the form of support groups or primary care providers for referrals for therapy or psychiatry. Encourage them not to be afraid of the stigma around mental health because our mental [health](#) impacts all other areas of our lives."

Important to reflect, stay hopeful

"I often tell my patients to tell me every negative thing that's happened," Pederson said. "This focuses on their resiliency and helps them process their experiences. Being kind and patient with ourselves and taking stock of all the things we've survived will help us as we move forward.

"It's important for us to accept what we can't control and remain hopeful. Hopelessness is a significant symptom of depression. While there is a lot of chaos, there are still positives, such as the vaccine, which will soon be available to many individuals."

Provided by Northwestern University

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