

# How does stress affect the body?

April 4 2023, by Kirstie Ganobsik

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Figuring out how stress affects your body can be a challenge, because the answer can depend on how stressed out you are, and for how long.

For instance, recent research has shown that [low-to-moderate stress levels](#) may actually be good for your ability to learn and apply knowledge. High [stress](#) levels, on the other hand, can negatively impact your [working memory](#).

Likewise, short-term stress can impact your body differently than [long-term stress](#).

So, how does stress affect the body when it's momentary versus chronic? Here, experts break down the most common physical, mental and emotional outcomes for both, and offer some tips on how to manage stress to help prevent long-term health issues.

## **Short-term stress effects on the body**

Cleveland Clinic psychologist [Dr. Susan Albers-Bowling](#) noted that [daily stressors](#) such as forgetting to pay a bill or missing the bus to work tend to cause short-term, low-to-moderate stress on the body.

"What happens in the body is that our muscles begin to tense, our heart begins to beat faster and more oxygen goes to our lungs, this is to help prepare for the stressor," she said in a Cleveland Clinic [article](#). "The good news is that often, stressors are minor. After the stressor passes, our body goes back to its normal resting state."

[Dr. Suchita Shah](#), a University of Oxford undergraduate primary care tutor and examiner, explained in an [article](#) that short-term stress may also be "acute" if the stressor involves an unexpected crisis, such as a car accident. For these situations, your stress response usually lasts about two to three days.

In addition to experiencing the same [physical symptoms](#) that you would with short-term, low-to-moderate stress, the health impacts of short-term

intense stress may include:

- Abdominal pain
- Nausea
- Headaches
- Anxiety
- Irritability and moodiness
- Chest pain
- Wanting to isolate
- Sleep issues
- Difficulty breathing
- Fatigue
- Feelings of detachment
- Trouble concentrating

### **Long-term stress effects on the body**

"Chronic stressors are things like financial issues and conflicts with family members," said Albers-Bowling.

She noted that with long-term stress, "your body gets stuck in overdrive in that fight-or-flight response, and it can't settle back down. So, your body becomes flooded with cortisol continuously. This causes inflammation, and it's the inflammation that makes you vulnerable to chronic disease."

According to [Yale Medicine](#), long-term stress may increase your risk of developing:

- Hypertension ([high blood pressure](#))
- Stroke

- Heart disease
- Depression
- Anxiety disorders
- Type 2 diabetes
- Arthritis
- Obesity
- Metabolic syndrome
- Addictions, including drugs, alcohol, gambling, or food

[Harvard Health](#) notes that chronic stress can also elevate your risk for developing several different types of dementia, including Alzheimer's disease. It does this in part by lowering activity levels in [brain regions](#) that handle high-level thinking tasks.

## Managing overall stress

Keeping your [stress in check](#) helps ensure it doesn't become a long-term issue that impacts your health. The good news is that there are several proven methods to help you manage your stress.

## Take a dip in nature

Research reveals that [parks, rivers and lakes](#) can make great stress relievers. In fact, the [Yale School of Environment](#) notes that several studies have revealed nature's ability to lower stress levels and boost psychological health.

One of these [studies](#) included nearly 20,000 participants, and it showed that 120 minutes a week in nature (but no less) elevated people's sense of good health and well-being.

"Two hours a week is hopefully a realistic target for many people, especially given that it can be spread over an entire week to get the

benefit," lead study author [Mathew White](#) said after the study was published.

## **Eat the right foods**

Eating a "rainbow of fruits and vegetables," reducing sugar intake and avoiding alcohol are great ways to reduce your stress, according to the [American Psychological Association](#) (APA).

## **Take time to rest and unwind**

"After experiencing times of great change, high demand or significant loss, it's essential to press pause and rest. Often creating time and space for rest means saying 'no' to invitations and requests for help, at least temporarily," Johns Hopkin stress management expert [Frances Callahan](#) said in recent a [blog](#).

## **Log off social (and traditional) media**

Like with sugar and alcohol, the APA [recommends](#) a "dietary restriction" of media. This can help reduce the psychological impact of processing so many stories, which can trigger the [stress response](#).

## **Know when to ask for help**

"If you're having trouble getting to work, or you have changes in your sleep patterns or your appetite, these are some indications that your stress level may be out of control," Albers-Bowling explained.

Your doctor can work with you on a stress-reduction plan that may include medication, stress-management techniques and counseling.

Callahan noted that "experiencing stress is inevitable, but managed well, stress can promote emotional and intellectual growth and resilience as we age."

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