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Heart Disease:

Stress Management for
a Healthy Heart

*The most important information
you need to improve your health*



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Introduction

For more than 10 years, millions of readers have trusted the bestselling Everything series for expert advice and important information on health topics ranging from pregnancy and postpartum care to heart health, anxiety, and diabetes. Packed with the most recent, up-to-date data, Everything health guides help you get the right diagnosis, choose the best doctor, and find the treatment options that work for you.

The Everything Healthy Living Series books are concise guides, focusing on only the essential information you need. Whether you're looking for an overview of traditional and alternative migraine treatments, advice on starting a heart-healthy lifestyle, or suggestions for finding the right medical team, there's an Everything Healthy Living Book for you.

Heart Disease

You may have heard of heart disease. Every day it seems a new article comes out about what heart disease does or what affects your heart. Not many people, though, know the full story.

Heart disease is known to be associated with heart attacks, strokes, and other cardiovascular diseases. High blood pressure, high cholesterol, and diabetes may put you at risk. By understanding and managing these risk factors, you can avoid premature death and disability.

Having these risk factors causes buildup in your arteries, the blood vessels that deliver oxygen and nutrients to your brain. When these arteries get too clogged, parts of your organs cannot receive what cells need to survive. If this happens in the blood vessels to the heart, you may develop a heart attack. If this happens in the blood vessels to your brain, you would suffer a stroke. These diseases can leave you disabled, paralyzed, or even kill you.

What you might not know is that you can modify your risk factors and decrease the chance that you will ever develop heart disease. If you know how to lower the bad type of cholesterol and increase the good type, you can significantly prevent clogging or even unclog your arteries, reducing your chance of suffering heart attacks and strokes.

To start to manage your risk factors, you need to get tested beginning at a fairly young age. These tests require repeating every few years, and if you are higher risk, you may need testing more often to determine the proper treatment. This knowledge will help to guide you as you implement changes in your life to improve what puts you at risk.

Heart disease can be greatly influenced by your diet, physical activity, if you smoke, your weight, and your levels of stress. By making certain changes in these areas, you can reduce your chance of early death and disability. Simple changes, such as eating fewer calories and bad fats in exchange for more fiber, nutrients, and good fats, can tremendously influence your risk of heart disease. Even a modest amount of physical activity a few days a week, no matter what the activity, can have a huge impact. Not smoking and reducing stress can also make a significant impact on your risk.

These changes work by modifying many risk factors at once, such as lowering your blood pressure, cholesterol, and blood sugar. Also, such changes in your lifestyle will give you more energy and an improved mood, improving the quality of your life.

Over the past twenty years, significant progress has been made in developing medications that address diabetes, high blood pressure, and high cholesterol and reduce the chance of cardiovascular disease. These medications can create negative side effects, but the benefits may outweigh the risks.

Overall, by understanding heart disease, how it acts, what you can do to manage it, and how to implement those actions, you can influence your future health tremendously, while potentially improving your current life.

If you'd like to learn more about heart disease, check out *The Everything Guide to Preventing Heart Disease*, available in print (978-1-4405-2820-0) and eBook (978-1-4405-2888-0) formats.

What Is Stress?

Stress. Even the sound of the word evokes feelings of tension. Stress is a daily aspect of modern living. Stress can keep you motivated and even save your life. If unmanaged, however, stress can kill you. Excess stress weakens the immune system. Furthermore, stress can make any disease condition worse.

Stress is actually a natural physiological response to something that triggers a feeling of fear or threat. This response, called fight or flight, is designed to help you survive life-threatening situations. The natural chemical response that affects your mind and body is like a miracle drug that can help save your life in the face of a dangerous emergency.

The Stress Response

The body's response to stress is stimulated by stress hormones like adrenaline and cortisol, released by your body to prepare you for action. Among other things, these stress hormones do the following:

- Increase your heart rate and blood pressure to pump an extra burst of oxygen-rich blood around your body so you can get moving
- Stop the flow of blood to your digestive system and skin by constricting arteries, saving blood flow for more needed areas
- Channel the increased blood flow to the brain and muscles by relaxing arteries
- Increase perspiration to cool the body
- Activate receptors that generate quick bursts of energy
- Speed up your breathing rate and open bronchial tubes to draw more oxygen-rich air into the lungs

When you look at all of these changes, it's easy to see how this chemically induced state of emergency preparedness is extremely useful in life-threatening situations.

Essential

The stress response protects the body in a number of ways. It triggers the body to release blood sugar into the bloodstream to provide immediately available energy for fuel. It beefs up the blood-clotting mechanism in the event of potential injury. In addition, your body becomes extremely alert to enable you to immediately spot any signs of danger.

The modern challenge, however, is to manage the stress response, which can trigger when you're not in any physical danger. In fact, most contemporary stresses are mental and emotional. You find yourself stuck in traffic, missing deadlines at work. You worry about your family, your money, and your health. For some people, these stress levels stay high throughout the day. Both body and mind feel the strain, and the body gets no opportunity to physically release any of this tension energy.

How Stress Harms Health

Stress can harm health if it mounts to levels at which you feel you can no longer cope. This usually occurs after stress levels have remained high over a prolonged period of time.

The hormones like adrenaline and cortisol released during stressful situations raise blood sugar and constrict many of your blood vessels. This raises your blood pressure, increasing your cardiovascular risk. The increased blood sugar and hormones increase your LDL and triglycerides while decreasing your HDL. Like smoking, obesity, or lack of exercise, stress affects all aspects of your cardiovascular risk.

Other physical and mental symptoms of excessive stress include rapid pulse, chronic muscle tension, headaches, digestive problems, ulcers, infections, irritability, depression, anxiety, loss of ability to concentrate,

altered sleeping or eating habits, and increased use of drugs or alcohol. Understanding stress and having skills to manage it effectively are important to your overall health and wellness.

Stress and Heart Disease

The American Heart Association does not include stress as one of the leading risk factors for heart disease. However, this may have more to do with the difficulty of separating stress from other risk factors, since stress contributes to various risk factors. In other words, it is difficult to prove that stress is an independent risk factor given that it also contributes to so many other risk factors, including smoking, physical inactivity, overeating, and high cholesterol, blood sugar, and blood pressure. The American Heart Association, however, does note that individual responses to stress may be a contributing factor to heart disease risk.

Stress and Heart Function

After studying the long-term effects of stress, some researchers believe that prolonged stress can cause damage to blood vessels. Stress hormones, to channel blood flow to essential areas in times of stress, will constrict. This constriction leads to endothelial dysfunction, a precursor to the development of atherosclerosis.

Over time, the blood vessels lose their ability to dilate effectively until the blood vessels cannot respond appropriately to changes in blood demands. For example, constricted arteries would fail to provide an increased blood flow to meet the needs of working muscles in the legs.

Identifying Stress in Your Life

Most contemporary stress-inducing situations are not dangerous in and of themselves. What makes them stressful is the way you react to them. Some people thrive in situations that make others miserably tense and anxious. For example, you may hate meeting deadlines, while a friend works productively under that type of pressure. If you are frequently rushed or

competitive and feel overwhelmed by this, or you let small frustrations get to you, or you find it hard to forget your worries and relax, tackling your stress levels will most likely improve your health. At the same time, you can certainly make your life more enjoyable.

Other types of stress are not caused by your attitude, but are the product of a busy life. For example, if you are driving in heavy traffic and someone quickly cuts in front of you, that is a stressful situation. You have a legitimate fear for your safety, as a car accident could result. Your reaction, however, does not require you to burn off any physical energy. Rather, you remain seated in your car. You are likely to tighten your muscles and experience feelings of tension and anxiety as your body undergoes the physiological and biochemical changes associated with the fight-or-flight response.

Often, when you feel “stressed out,” it is a generalized feeling of stress. If you take a moment to examine your situation, however, you will find that your feelings are actually the cumulative result of numerous individual pressures that have finally reached the boiling point. One of the first steps toward learning how to manage stress effectively is to identify these individual pressures.

Alert

Numerous studies demonstrate that people who are more likely to become angry have about three times greater risk of having a heart attack or sudden cardiac death than those who are less prone to become angry. Other studies show that as people experience anger, they are more likely to have an arrhythmia or irregular heartbeat.

The next time you start to feel overwhelmed and stressed out, explore these feelings in greater depth. Ask yourself the following questions to determine what is causing these emotions:

- Am I overcommitted?

- Am I taking care of others and neglecting myself?
- Am I trying to accomplish everything on my own without asking for any support from anyone else?
- Are my expectations unrealistic?
- What is going on in my life right now that gives me a sense of struggle?
- Is what I stress over more important than my health and happiness?

If you are the type of person who finds it helpful to keep a journal, try to record things that trigger your stress. Write down what happened, what you were thinking or feeling, and how you reacted physically. This can give you valuable insight into the cumulative triggers you face throughout the day. Then consider the importance of those things and the importance of your long-term health and well-being. Consider the effects of stress on your health and mood and how that then affects those around you. Is what you stress over more concerning than premature death and disability? If not, then it is worth learning how to manage your stress.

Essential

When you start to identify the causes for your feelings and also note how you react to these stressors, you bring more awareness and understanding to your personal situation. Once you realize what triggers your stress, you are ready to consider taking realistic steps to cope with your personal matters.

Strategies for Dealing with Stress

It's important for your health and mental wellness that you feel a sense of control over your life. Making time to learn stress management skills and relaxation techniques can help you gain that control. Learning how to manage or eliminate some of the stressors in your life is also important for keeping your immune system strong, reducing your risk of illness, and improving your feelings of well-being.

Identify Priorities and Manage Time Effectively

Time management is a critical skill to develop to successfully manage stress. Everyone has the same number of hours in the day. Some people, however, are more effective managers of their time and priorities. To get organized, first identify your priorities. Next, make a realistic plan for how long it will take to get things done. Do the best you can, and remember to leave time for yourself.

If you feel that you need help in this area, consider taking a course in time or stress management. Consult your health care provider about available resources. You may want to enroll in a group course or work one on one with a counselor.

Rely on Social Support

Numerous studies have shown the positive affect of relationships on stress and health. Prioritizing and fostering those relationships is important not only for those around you, but for yourself as well. The more close ties you have with your family, friends, and community, the greater benefit to your health and happiness. Studies even indicate that pet ownership can contribute to heart health. Researchers have found that pet owners consistently have reduced stress reactions as measured by lower heart rates and blood pressures, especially when the pets are present.

Forgiveness is important to coping with difficult emotions. Negative feelings and stressful situations can adversely affect your health. When you forgive others for actions you feel were unfair or inappropriate, you can release or heal strong negative emotions.

Express Yourself Without Anger

Remember that people who get angry easily are much more likely to die from a heart attack. If you find that you are often irritated or annoyed, learn constructive methods to deal with disagreeable situations. Learn more effective communication skills to defuse conflicts. Make sure you are not allowing resentment to build up inside you. Over time, denial of

anger can lead to unhealthy blowups or chronic negative feelings. The healthiest approach is to learn how to effectively express your feelings in positive and constructive ways.

It may help to remember some simple alternatives to becoming angry or frustrated in stressful situations. If possible, leave the scene of a stressful situation before it gets to you. Talk to someone you trust about how you feel or take some time on your own to brainstorm nonstressful ways to respond to a stressful issue. Most important, remember to breathe deeply and ask yourself, “In the scheme of things, does this really matter? Is this more important than my health and happiness?”

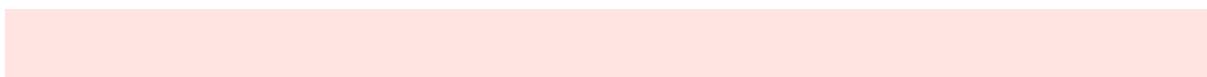
Make Time for Self-Care

One of the biggest contributors to feelings of stress is the sense that life is out of control. To avoid this, make time for yourself, just like taking time to exercise or eat healthy. You deserve time for your own self-care. For one thing, it supports your health, which in turn helps you better support those you care about. Take a moment to identify things that you enjoy, that bring you pleasure, and that are fun and restorative. Make it a point to incorporate these activities into your schedule.

It is never easy to change a habit. Unless stress is managed and the reasons for maintaining the behavioral change are foremost in your mind, old habits prevail. A calm, clear, and focused mind and a healthy, realistic attitude are important for achieving any goal. This holds equally true for the incorporation of healthy lifestyle habits.

Restoring Health Through Relaxation

Research suggests that relaxation techniques can be used to counteract the stress response, with significant health benefits. Regular relaxation can reduce blood cortisol levels, blood pressure, cholesterol, and blood glucose.



Fact

Clinical trials show that relaxation can reduce headaches, pain, anxiety, and menopausal symptoms. At the same time, it can enhance healing, immune cell response, concentration, and feelings of well-being. It has even shown to improve fertility rates in infertile women.

Research done in the 1970s by Dr. Herbert Benson of Harvard University began to explore the relationship between mental techniques and physiological effects. Benson studied people who participated in transcendental meditation. He coined the term “the relaxation response,” which is defined as “a calm state brought about by sitting quietly and repeating a sound, words, or muscular activity over and over. When everyday thoughts intrude, the person passively disregards them and returns to the repetition.” The relaxation response reflects a physiological state brought about by reducing stress and calming the mind.

The following effects are the result of the relaxation response:

- Reduced blood pressure
- Reduced heart rate
- Slower breathing rate
- Restoration of blood flow to the extremities
- Reduction in perspiration
- Release of muscular tension

In other words, relaxation counteracts the stress response and restores the body to a state of balance.

As a result of numerous studies in this area, relaxation techniques are used to help people with problems such as hypertension and cardiac arrhythmias, among others. While these skills are useful for people who are managing chronic disease, they are also valuable for promoting health and preventing stress-related illnesses. Make time to explore and learn techniques that help you relax.

Essential

Researchers have observed that people who learn effective stress-management techniques are much more successful at achieving long-lasting behavioral change in the areas of improved nutrition, smoking cessation, increased physical activity, and weight management.

Relaxation and Deep Breathing

One of the easiest ways to achieve relaxation is to engage in deep, mindful breathing exercises. This can help trigger the relaxation response. This type of exercise is easy to learn, fast to perform, and requires no equipment. As you continue to explore other methods of relaxation, use the following breathing exercise to help you ease tensions and restore your sense of balance and calm. It will do the health of your body, mind, and spirit a world of good. As you emerge from your restorative relaxation time, remind yourself that you have the power to create your own health and enjoy all that life has to offer to you.

A Simple Breathing Exercise

This exercise is an excellent introduction to relaxation and meditation techniques. It increases self-awareness and body awareness. A two- to three-minute “breathing break” during the day is very restorative. To perform this simple exercise, sit or lie comfortably with your hands resting in your lap. Relax your muscles and close your eyes.

Make no effort to control your breath, simply breathe naturally. As you breathe in and out, focus your attention on the breath and how the body moves with each inhalation and exhalation.

Take a few moments to focus inward. Notice the movement of your body as you breathe. Observe your inhalation and exhalation. Pay particular attention to how the breath moves your body. Observe your chest, shoulders, rib cage, and belly. Notice subtleties such as whether the chest or belly rises with inhalation and how your body responds to exhalation. Don’t try to control your breath, simply focus your attention on

it. This singular focus brings you into the present moment and into the immediate experience of your body. It often results in slower, deeper breaths that further relax your body. Continue for two to three minutes and then gently open your eyes. Over time, you can lengthen the period of relaxation, if you prefer.

Restoring Life Through Meditation

For centuries, many have used meditation to reduce stress in their lives. The act of meditation is similar to relaxation in the attempt to let go of stressful thoughts. The key difference between meditation and relaxation is that during relaxation, one tries to passively empty the mind, while meditation represents active focus on certain thoughts through abandoning other thoughts.

Numerous studies have shown that meditation, like relaxation, improves health and mood. Meditation is also known to improve cognition and focus. Meditation produces many of the same physiologic changes as the relaxation response. Because of meditation's differences in practice of intense focus rather than lack of focus, meditation can better serve those who have difficulty emptying their mind and decompressing. Meditation can also be complementary. Similar to how varied exercises can further help your body, the most stress reduction is likely obtained by incorporating various practices that reduce stress. Not only do you obtain the benefits of each practice, but as with using different physical exercises to continue to develop and motivate the body, using different mental practices can help you continue to develop and motivate the mind.

Practicing Meditation

The practice of meditation can seem complex, but the basic concept is quite simple. The key, like relaxation, exercise, eating healthier, or changing or creating any other habit, is that it takes practice.

To begin, though you can commence nearly any time at any place, the ideal setting is a quiet area, sitting comfortably. Sitting on the floor with your back straight tends to focus your attention further and is recommended but not necessary. Start to breathe in and out. Once in a rhythm, begin to focus your thoughts on an area of your choice. Make that as specific an area as possible. You can focus on a certain aspect of your life, your family, your work, your health, or just simply focus on your breathing, being in the present moment.

What then makes meditation challenging is the other thoughts that enter your head. You may start to drift or hear a lot of background noise in your own mind. Recognize those other thoughts, do not get frustrated, and let go of those thoughts, bringing yourself back to where you originally wished to focus. This might seem simple, but you are constantly barraged with thoughts and stimuli throughout the day. Going even sixty seconds without allowing some new thought or stimulus is surprisingly challenging. With practice, you will notice you are able to focus for longer and longer periods. As with exercise, the more you do, the better it is for your health.

The highest yield of meditation is when you start your day and shortly before going to bed. Set a goal to practice for at least five minutes. You can derive significant benefit from five minutes, but once you are able to meditate that long without significant thought interruption, you may choose to practice even longer.

The Overall Benefits to You

With relaxation and meditation, many people feel they cannot spare the five minutes to obtain the significant benefit. Those who practice relaxation and meditation, though, know that the several minutes they spend incorporating either practice into their daily routine adds much more time to their lives. You will find it easier to focus, making you more productive. You will sleep better, making you feel more rested and able to

do more. By reducing your stress, you will improve your cholesterol, blood pressure, and blood sugar, and make you feel more able to tackle other aspects of your health. This will add years to your life and improve the quality of those years.

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Heart Disease: Stress Management for a Healthy Heart contains material adapted and abridged from *The Everything Guide to Preventing Heart Disease* by Murdoc Khaleghi, MD, copyright ©2011 Simon and Schuster, ISBN 10: 1-4405-2820-9, ISBN 13: 978-1-4405-2820-0.

Published by
Adams Media, an imprint of Simon & Schuster, Inc.
57 Littlefield Street, Avon, MA 02322 U.S.A.
www.adamsmedia.com

ePub ISBN 10: 1-4405-6580-5
ePub ISBN 13: 978-1-4405-6580-9

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Is available from the publisher.

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