



Stress Management for a Healthy Heart

What is stress?

Stress is the way we react physically, mentally, and emotionally to various conditions, changes, and demands in our lives. Unless we can regularly release the tension that comes with stress, it can increase our risk for physical and mental illness.

Not all stress is bad. Positive stress (eustress) can challenge us to act in creative and resourceful ways. In fact, too little stress can be bad for us, since stress can motivate us to do our best. However, when stress becomes so great that it overwhelms us, negative stress (distress) sets in.

How can stress affect my body?

Stress affects your body both immediately (acute stress) and over time (chronic stress). The acute stress response, sometimes called the fight-or-flight response, begins when you are faced with a threat or stressful situation. Your body responds to the threat by releasing chemicals that trigger a set of changes throughout the body:

- Your heart rate increases to move blood to the muscles and brain.
- Your blood pressure goes up and you begin to breath more rapidly.
- Your digestion slows down and you begin to perspire more heavily.
- The centers of your eyes get bigger (pupils dilate) and you feel a rush of strength.

Your body becomes tense, alert, and ready for action. After this initial alarm reaction, your body stays on alert until your mind tells you that the situation has passed. Then your brain signals an "all clear" to your body, which stops producing the chemicals that caused the physical reaction and gradually returns to normal. The chemicals take 30 to 60 minutes to leave your system, so if you are stressed again within that time, your body won't recover between the two stressful events.

What can I do to manage stress?

Managing your stress is as important to your overall health as eating better, being more physically active and not smoking. All of these lifestyle factors work together. Eating better and being more active also help you manage stress. Many people find it easier to quit smoking after they have found new ways to deal with stress. Just as some behaviors can combine to harm various systems in your body, making changes in your lifestyle can have a positive impact on your overall health. Below is a list of simple activities to try when you are feeling stress.

- Go to bed 15 to 30 minutes earlier at night.
- Reduce or eliminate caffeine consumption.
- Get a massage. Even a 15-minute back rub by a family member or friend can do wonders.
- Jot down your thoughts and feelings in a journal. It may help give you a new perspective.
- Allow yourself some personal time each day & use the time to read, relax, and reflect.
- Change your appearance. Get a haircut, manicure, or new outfit.
- Take a long, warm bath. Enhance the atmosphere with bubbles, music, or a good book.
- Keep in regular communication with your friends. Sharing unsettling feelings with people you trust is the first step toward resolving them.



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- Limit activities with negative friends who reinforce bad feelings.
- Hug your children or your friends. The power of touch is enormous.
- Do volunteer work or play with a pet.
- Delegate some of your tasks and chores from your To Do list.
- Take up a hobby. Start a class in painting, drawing, pottery, carpentry, knitting, or cooking.
- Get away for an afternoon, a day, or go to a movie.
- Practice relaxation exercises; learn yoga.
- Simplify your life by cutting out a few activities.
- Learn to say no to requests if they will make your level of stress unmanageable.
- Organize your closet, garage, or attic.
- Write a letter or talk to a friend.

Silver Cross offers stress management programs for individuals and groups. Call 1-888-660-HEAL for more information.

What can I do to avoid feeling stressed?

Stress comes in cycles, and in the future, you will face periods of high stress and of low stress. Be alert for those periods when stress is increasing in your life, so that you can handle it before it becomes overwhelming. Start practicing your relaxation skills or other stress management strategies early. If your stress increases until it feels unmanageable, the challenge of getting it under control is much more difficult. The stress itself robs you of the time and energy to cope with it effectively. If you are concerned about your stress level and feel unable to cope, talk with your health care provider.

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Take care. Take charge. Take heart.

Heart disease is the #1 killer of women. It is a greater threat than all cancers combined. Since 1984, more women than men have died each year of heart disease.

Silver Cross Hospital's Women's HeartAdvantage™ Program is committed to helping women with heart disease. But while there is much a hospital, its physicians and nurses can do, we can make an even greater difference together with you. Take care of yourself. Know what your risk is. Know what your heart health indicators are. And then take charge. Choose to quit smoking, to eat better, to exercise more, and to improve your health. Because women of America, this is your life. We hope you'll put your heart into it.

For more information on Silver Cross Hospital's Women's HeartAdvantage™ Program or a referral to a Women's HeartAdvantage™ certified physician, call 1-888-660-HEAL (4325) or visit www.silvercross.org.



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