

# Stress & Your Health

Stress is a common part of so many of our lives. It may be related to family, financial, or work-related issues among so many other things. The link between stress and high blood pressure is still being studied, but we do know that stress contributes to risk factors like unhealthy diet, poor sleep and alcohol use. Stress is also strongly linked to mental health challenges which increases risks for heart disease and death.

Positive mental health traits include happiness, optimism, gratitude and having a sense of purpose. People who have these qualities usually have lower blood pressure, better blood sugar control, lower cholesterol and lower inflammation in the body. All these factors help protect the heart and other organs.

## What happens when we are stressed?

When we are stressed, not only do we feel bad, but our bodies are also releasing stress hormones into the blood. These hormones, like cortisol and adrenaline, prepare your body for “fight or flight” mode. In “fight or flight” mode, our heart beats faster to pump more blood to our body which raises our blood pressure. This is a good thing when we need to react quickly or are in danger, but constant stressors keep our bodies in this state for days or weeks at a time.

## What are some strategies to manage or reduce stress?

### Build healthy lifestyle habits

Physical activity and exercise have been shown to release endorphins which are mood-boosting hormones. Spending time talking with family or friends or doing other activities, like taking a walk outside, can help reduce stress and improve physical health.

### Focus on things you can control

There are many things in life outside of our control. Avoid things that cause stress when possible, for example avoiding driving in rush-hour traffic. Try counting to 10 before responding or reacting. Break down big problems into smaller, easier tasks.

### Practice gratitude and joy

Deep breathing routines and meditation can help lower stress, even 10 deep breaths at a time or 5-10 minutes of quiet time. Positive thinking can boost our feelings about our life and reduce stressful thoughts.

### Use positive self-talk

Sometimes we are our own worst critic. Try to change the inner voice in your head from negative to positive and learn to treat yourself with patience and kindness.

- Instead of “I can’t do this” say “I’ll do the best I can.”
- Instead of “I hate when this happens,” say “I know how to deal with this- I have done it before.”
- Instead of “I can’t believe I messed up,” say “I’m human and we all make mistakes. I can fix it.”

