

Chronic stress can lead to chronic health conditions

By Michael Langiulli, M.D., FACC

Stress is an unfortunate fact of life for most people: that feeling of worry, dread or nervous anticipation that accompanies the challenges we deal with on the job or in the home, during our daily commute or errands, or in our dealings with family, friends or colleagues.

When we encounter a stressful situation – no matter how nerve-racking it may be, our body physically reacts, releasing hormones that enable us to deal with the circumstances: the well-known ‘fight or flight’ reaction. These hormones – adrenaline, which increases our heart rate; and cortisol, which elevates the blood pressure and increases the amount of blood sugar in our system – were intended to help us to survive imminent danger.

Nowadays, we’re not dealing with short, intense survival situations such as wild animals or unfriendly cave dwellers – instead, the source of stress might be the cubicle dweller next door, a family member you don’t see eye-to-eye with, or gridlock on the interstate. Today, the “stressors” in our lives are more likely to be prolonged, continual irritants – and our bodies have less recovery time between one stressful episode and the next. This lack of “down time” between periods of stress can adversely impact our health.

What happens when our bodies release chemicals designed to fight danger, and the sources of this stress remain or we don’t get sufficient rest recovery between one stressful event and the next? This prolonged, continual stress – on and off, for days or weeks at a time – is known as chronic stress. Chronic stress has been linked to numerous health problems, such as high blood pressure and high cholesterol, cardiovascular problems, headaches and stomach pain, depression, and a weakened immune system.

Studies have not proven that stress directly causes health problems, but it contributes to behavioral and lifestyle habits that negatively affect our health. For example, stress does not *cause* high blood pressure, according to the American Heart Association, but the coping mechanisms that Americans use to deal with stress – most of them unhealthy – do. These include eating foods high in fat and sodium which leads to being overweight, drinking excess alcohol, smoking and being too tired to be physically active.

Likewise, the link between stress and heart disease is not a direct correlation, but it’s known that chronic stress causes an increase in the heart rate and blood pressure. Long-term, this may contribute to coronary artery disease – damage to the walls of the arteries which, in turn, can contribute to an increased risk of a heart attack. Stress is also linked to blood clots, arrhythmia (abnormal heartbeat) and heart failure.

Stress can also make you sick. Stress-related hormones affect the immune system, decreasing the body’s ability to fight off colds and other respiratory infections. Research has shown that people under continual stress get colds and flu more often, and heal more slowly after being injured. The

Feeling stressed?

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continual tension in the muscles when you are stressed can lead to neck, shoulder and low back pain – and stress can further inflame joint conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis.

Stress can make pre-existing conditions worse, such as asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD), or irritable bowel syndrome (IBS). People with asthma who are under extreme stress can experience more severe and frequent asthma attacks, because chronic stress prompts the body to release the hormones that dilate blood vessels, intensifying the lungs inflammatory response, and constricts the airways.

Stress shows up in other ways, as well. It is one of the primary contributors to skin conditions like acne, as well as psoriasis, a chronic skin condition and autoimmune disease characterized by itchy, red, scaly skin and painful joints.

Stress can also cause us to lose sleep, costing us valuable recharging time. While we sleep, the body resets various internal functions lowering blood pressure; rejuvenating muscles; restoring energy; and releasing hormones that regulate appetite, internal organ function, our immune system, and tissue growth and repair. Insufficient sleep also inhibits our ability to effectively deal with the stress we encounter during the day.

Learn how to effectively manage stress for the good of your long-term health. Visit the Health Resources link on www.northernlouisianamedicalcenter.com to take an interactive stress trigger assessment or simply to learn more about how stress affects the body. Or, call us today at 318-251-8411 for a consultation with one of our health professionals about effectively managing stress.

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Remember that this information is not intended to replace the advice of your doctor, but rather to increase awareness and help equip patients with information to facilitate conversations with their physician.

Sources: American Heart Association www.americanheart.org; National Institutes of Health, www.nih.gov; American Academy of Family Physicians, www.familydoctor.org; Web MD, www.webmd.com

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