5 ways to protect your heart from stress

Heart disease has long been associated with tangible, measurable risk factors like elevated blood pressure and cholesterol, eating too much sweets and fatty food, leading a sedentary life, and smoking and drinking. Yet medical experts are now convinced that the heart is also just as affected by stress.

"Stress—that is, the physical, mental, or emotional strain one feels from a demanding circumstance—is part of everyday life," says Dr. Alejandro Ramon Prieto of the Cardiology Section of Makati Medical Center (MakatiMed). "Worrying about money, sitting in traffic for hours, being sick or losing a loved one can be stressful. Granted, some stress is good for you, but it's also important to deal with pressure and cut stress triggers before they heavily affect your heart," he adds.

Stress hormones

There are five ways stress affects your heart. First, stress releases adrenaline and cortisol, stress hormones that regulate heart rate and blood pressure as well as how our body uses carbohydrates, protein and fat. They also increase our blood sugar and give us energy to face stress head on.

"Constant stress keeps your cortisol levels up, which results in headaches, anxiety, trouble sleeping and digestion problems," Prieto points out. "It also elevates blood sugar, blood pressure, cholesterol and triglycerides, which are common risk factors of heart disease."

Second, stress triggers plaque buildup and plaque rupture. Prieto says studies reveal that people who have survived a natural disaster or those whose jobs require them to work long, grueling hours are more likely to develop fatty plaques in their blood vessels, making them prone to stroke or heart attack.

Stress also affects the way your blood clots. Prieto explains that your blood consistency becomes thicker when you're stressed, making you vulnerable to heart attack or stroke. Plus, it also affects circulation. "Stress can trigger poor blood flow to the heart muscle, thus depriving the heart of oxygen and blood," he says.

Finally, stress also leads to unhealthy habits. Who hasn't chain-smoked, turned to alcohol, or stress-eaten junk food at the height of a problematic situation?

"Stress tends to make us behave in ways that increase our risk of heart disease," says Prieto. While stress will always be around, there are better—and healthier—ways of coping with it without damaging your heart.

Eat right. Choose foods low in saturated fat, trans fat, sodium and refined sugar to lessen the risk of heart disease. Go for foods that are good for the heart.

"Instead of sugary drinks, opt for a calming cup of green or black tea, which is linked to lower rates of heart attack," says Prieto. "Fatty fish like salmon, tuna and sardines contain omega-3 fatty acids that interact with mood-related brain molecules. They're also good for the heart."

Other stress-reducing treats: nuts like almonds, pistachio and walnuts; and when in moderation, dark chocolate, since it's rich in flavonoids or compounds that help reduce inflammation and lower your risk of heart disease.

Sweat it out. From running and dancing to the graceful movements of tai chi or brisk walking, exercise is the ultimate antistress buster. Prieto says it releases mood-elevating endorphins. It also lowers blood pressure, blood sugar and cholesterol levels and keeps you fit and at your ideal weight, which can help cut your risk of heart disease. If your work has been forcing you to sit for hours, take regular breaks to move around and keep stress at bay.

Sleep more. Sleep allows the body to restore and recharge, playing a key role in nearly all aspects of physical health. Insufficient or fragmented sleep can contribute to problems with blood pressure and heighten the risk of heart disease, heart attacks, diabetes and stroke. As a result, getting good sleep may help prevent damage to the cardiovascular system, and for people with heart problems, can be part of following a heart-healthy lifestyle.

Meditate. "Simply sitting down in a quiet spot and taking, slow deliberate breaths using your diaphragm can soothe frayed nerves," says Prieto. Other forms of meditation include yoga and prayer. Not only can meditation improve how you cope with stress, but regular practice can motivate you to maintain heart-healthy behaviors like following healthy eating habits, making time for exercise and getting adequate sleep.

Find your own stressrelieving solution. Tending to potted plants or a garden is a relaxing pastime. Reading a good book takes your mind away from the source of your stress. Music can either calm or uplift you. That's why Prieto suggests engaging in activities or hobbies that can help you unwind, maintain a positive outlook or change your mood from bad to good. "Whatever it is, be sure that it brings you joy," he says.