

Five ways stress affects your heart — and five ways to protect it

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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, from the Section of Cardiology 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.”

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

“Constant stress keeps your cortisol levels up, which results in headaches, anxiety, trouble sleeping and digestion problems,” Dr. 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. Dr. 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. “When the plaque breaks and creates blockages elsewhere, this makes them prone to stroke or heart attack,” he adds.

Dr. Prieto adds that stress also affects the way your blood clots. He 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.

Stress also leads to unhealthy habits. Who hasn't either chain-smoked, turned to alcohol, or stress-ate 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 Dr. 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. "Fatty fish like salmon, tuna, and sardines contain omega-3 fatty acids interact with mood-related brain molecules.

They're also good for the heart," says Dr. Prieto.

Sweat it out. From running and dancing to the graceful movements of tai chi or brisk walking, exercise is the ultimate anti-stress buster. Dr. 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

Sleep more. Sleep allows the body to restore and recharge, playing a key role in nearly all aspects of physical health.

Meditate. "Simply sitting down in a quiet spot and taking, slow deliberate breaths using your diaphragm can soothe frayed nerves," says Dr. Prieto. Other forms of meditation include yoga and prayer.

Find your own stress-relieving 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.