How to manage the impact of stress on your heart health

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Stress is a natural part of life, but when it becomes chronic or overwhelming, it can take a serious toll on our health – particularly our heart.



We all get anxious and tense from time to time – but new data suggests stress is a key factor preventing people from protecting their heart health. According to an Ipsos B&A survey of 1,018 participants for the Her Heart Matters campaign, the cost of health checks (25%), stress and lack of time (26%), low motivation (23%), expensive gym memberships (21%), and the high price of healthy foods (18%) all play roles in why many women don't take steps to protect their heart health.

But what impact can stress directly have on our heart health over time – and is there any way we can manage this? We got in touch with Dr Malcolm Finlay, consultant cardiologist at Nuffield Health, St Bartholomew's Hospital, to find out...

How can stress levels affect our heart health?

"Stress can have direct effects on the heart both acutely and chronically," says Dr Finlay. "We know that the body is well able to cope with levels of stress from time to time, but acute levels of mental stress can occasionally be associated with the trigger for abnormal heart rhythms.

"In a more chronic setting, stress hormones can drive chronically higher blood pressure, which although a minor effect, can lead to long-term damage. Furthermore, stress can drive inflammatory responses of the body."

He also adds that stress-driving behaviours such as smoking and drinking alcohol to excess may also be adverse to heart health.

Can stress be a trigger for heart attacks or acute cardiac events?

"There are well-documented times when acute stress has been ascribed as a trigger event for a heart attack, and this can sometimes be seen in the high risk of cardiac events around surgical procedures," says Dr Finlay.

However, he explains that it's hard to say that this is causative.

"Usually the acute stress event seems to shift the timing of something that would happen anyway rather than produce a completely new phenomenon," explains the cardiologist. "If, for example, a per-

son has heart disease and is likely to have a heart arrhythmia within the next few weeks or months, an acute stress event may make them more likely to occur around the acute time of that stress event."

Furthermore, Dr Finlay highlights that stress is not the sole contributing factor to heart disease or heart attacks.

"Controlling mental stress alone won't treat heart disease. Nor is it sufficient to reliably prevent heart disease," clarifies the cardiologist. "All of us will experience stress from time to time and to be able to embrace this and having techniques to manage that will be important rather than to completely try and avoid anything stressful."

A few stress management techniques that might help

Identify causes: "Try and remove the chronic things that may cause you stress in life," suggests Dr Finlay. Live a healthy lifestyle: "Not smoking, reducing alcohol consumption and taking part in regular exercise – will be helpful," says Dr Finlay.

Make time for exercise:

"Build in some type of routine and regular activity," says Dr Finlay. "Regular exercise is going to be extremely helpful as it is wellassociated with other beneficial behaviours, such as a good diet and alcohol moderation."

Review your priorities

"Ensure one reviews what is really important in life rather than being always caught up in the immediate day-to-day," advises Dr Finlay. "I know that's hard for most of us, but it is important to have one's overall life goals and try and adapt to this."