- Stress / Mind and body

STRESS AND YOUR BODY

When a stressor sticks around for a long time (toxic sibling, anyone?) or when you're faced with one crisis after another, it creates a perfect biological storm that can lead to a host of chronic health problems.

DIGESTIVE SLOWDOWN

Reduced blood flow, slower digestion, and changes to the gut microbiome all set the stage for ulcers, irritable bowel syndrome, gastroesophageal reflux disease, and other stomach troubles.

BRAIN DRAIN

Chemicals ferrying messages from one nerve to another get depleted when emergencies seem constant. The nerves themselves also shrink, especially in the prefrontal cortex, a part of the brain involved with decision-making, Sinha says. If you have trouble concentrating or finalizing plans, this could be the reason.

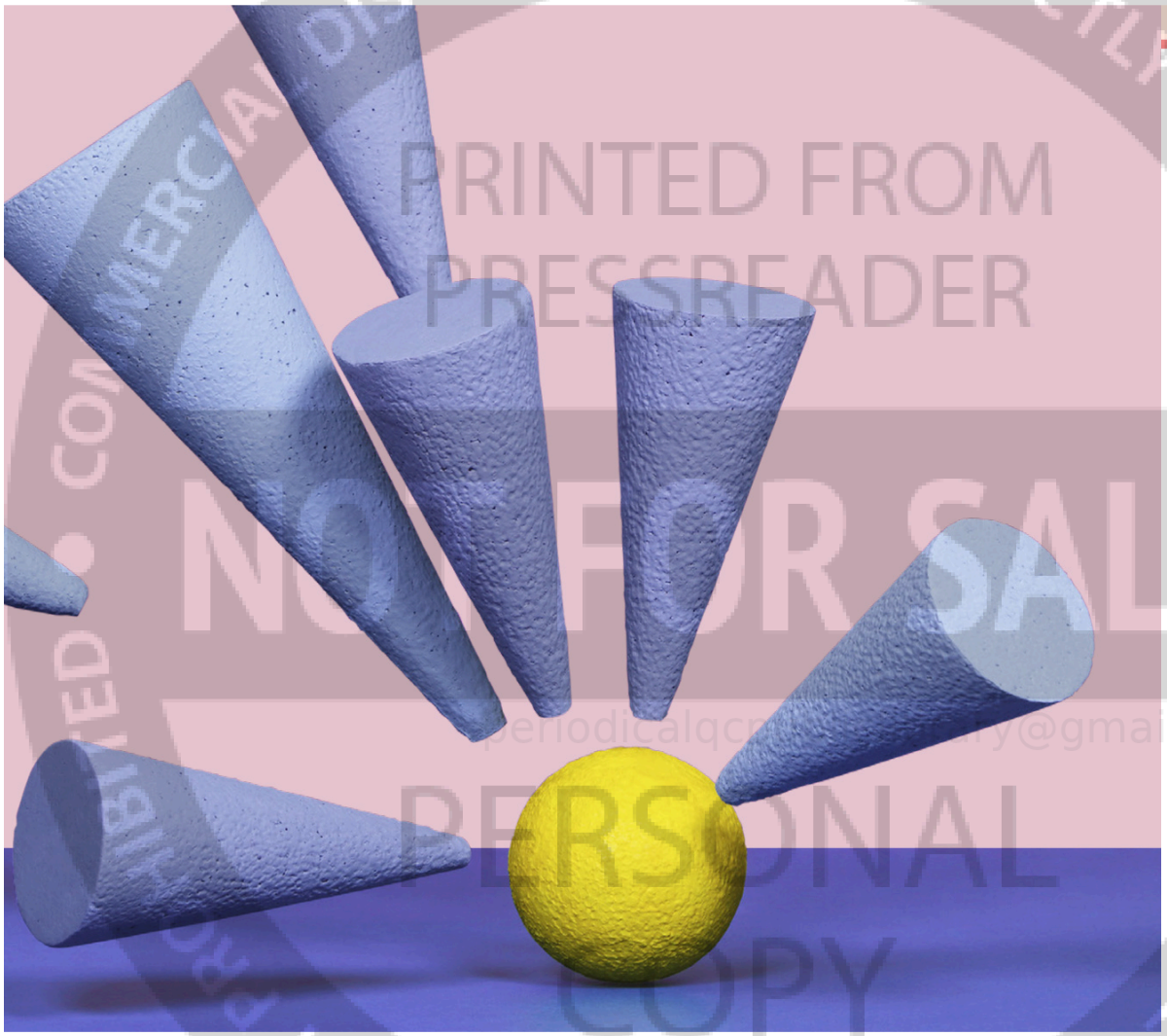
IMMUNE OVERLOAD

Hormones whose levels rise during stress, such as cortisol and adrenaline, are the same ones that alert your immune system to mount a response when you're exposed to cold or flu germs. But when high levels of these hormones circulate for too long, this alert function becomes blunted and the immune system doesn't get the robust signal it needs to fight. "As a result, when a virus does come in, the immune system doesn't counter it," so you're more likely to get sick, Sinha says.

SAGGING SKIN

Stress can trigger oxidative damage that

GETTY IMAGES.



affects fat and protein cells that keep skin bright and plump, so your face may start to look older (you're still beautiful!). "Normally chronological age is tied to biological age, but cumulative stress disconnects that link, which can accelerate aging," says Sinha.

HORMONAL HAVOC

When stress leads heart rate and blood pressure to stay elevated for months or years, it can increase the likelihood of developing health problems such as heart disease.

Autoimmune diseases, type 2 diabetes, arthritis, and cancer have also been associated with chronic stress, possibly related to dysregulated hormonal responses (such as consistently high cortisol levels) and a suppressed immune system.