- Stress

7 signs you're chronically stressed…

KEY SYMPTOMS INCLUDE DIGESTIVE ISSUES, SKIN RASHES AND TENSION HEADACHES. BY CAMILLA FOSTER

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WE all experience different levels of stress on a day-to-day basis, whether that is due to family demands or work pressures, but it's important to be aware of when it might be negatively impacting your health.



Dr Michael Zemenides, co-founder of the A-Z General Practice at The Wellington Hospital, part of HCA Healthcare UK, explains what chronic stress is and highlights what the key symptoms are.

What is chronic stress?

"A little bit of stress can be a good thing to help us get things done – for example, that increased productivity we might get before a deadline," says Dr Zemenides.

"However, chronic stress is when we're overstimulated by stress over a prolonged period of time. So, you develop this prolonged state of tension or alertness in response to constant, ongoing pressures, rather than intermittent, short-term challenges."

Is chronic stress an official diagnosis?

"While 'chronic stress' itself is not a formal medical diagnosis, it is a recognised condition that can contribute to, or coexist with, other health issues such as anxiety disorders, depression, insomnia, or burnout," explains Dr Zemenides.

"Healthcare professionals assess chronic stress through a combination of symptom history, life-style factors, and sometimes physical health indicators [such as blood pressure, weight changes, or hormone levels]."

Here are seven signs to look out for...

Cardiovascular effects: "Stressful episodes cause a fight-or-flight response, where hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline are released and these can have multiple different effects within your body," explains Dr Zemenides.

"In terms of cardiovascular symptoms, you can get a cascade effect where your heart feels like it's abnormally beating or racing and your blood pressure can increase."

Muscle tension or pain: "Muscle tension is also quite common," says Dr Zemenides. "Ongoing stress keeps muscles in a semi-contracted state, especially around the neck, shoulders and back."
Tension headaches: "Muscle tension can be a trigger for tension headaches," says Dr Zemenides. "Typically tension-type headaches are characterised by what we call a 'band-like sensation' around the head that can result in pain or a dull, aching sensation on both sides of the head. Stress can also result in sleep disturbances and that can contribute to the development of tension headaches."
Digestive issues: "When stressed, the body prioritises energy for muscles and the brain over digestion," notes Dr Zemenides. "This can slow down peristalsis [the movement of food through the digestive tract], allowing more time for fermentation by gut bacteria, which leads to gas and bloating."
Feeling constantly anxious or irritable: "There's also emotional side effects of chronic stress," highlights Dr Zemenides. "So, you might find yourself feeling irritable, angry, tearful and in this constant state of feeling worried or anxious, feeling hopeless or scared, which can impact your decision-making processes."
Skin rashes: "Stress-related inflammation and hormonal changes can worsen skin sensitivity and lead to hives or rashes," says Dr Zemenides.
Change in appetite: "Some people might find they get a reduction in appetite and lose weight, and others might turn to unhealthy binge-eating practices," says Dr Zemenides.
When to seek professional advice
Dr Zemenides adds: "If symptoms like headaches, palpitations, insomnia or digestive issues are just not going away, and you can't explain them or figure out a way to manage them, then it's definitely worth seeking advice from your GP."
Bringing a stress diary to your appointment could help.
"Identifying the triggers is key," adds Dr Zemenides. "Documenting your level of stress, things that are particularly triggering and all your symptoms that you're feeling in real time each day can help us link your symptoms with the overall level of stress in your life."