

- Stress / Mind and body



6 ways

STRESS AFFECTS YOUR BODY

From migraines to irregular periods, Editor-in-Chief Katy Sunnassee looks at the ways stress can show up in your body.

WORDS: KATY SUNNASSEE. IMAGES: SHUTTERSTOCK.

1 DISRUPTS YOUR PERIODS

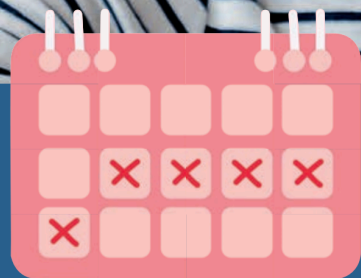
For some women, stress may play a role in causing irregular or missed periods. It's not fully understood why this happens, but stress does play a part in suppressing the functioning of your hypothalamus, a part of your brain that controls the pituitary gland. The pituitary is your body's master gland, responsible for controlling your thyroid, adrenals and ovaries.

Any disruption to ovarian dysfunction could lead to problems

with oestrogen production, ovulation, or other reproductive processes. And as oestrogen is an important hormone that helps build the uterine lining in preparation for pregnancy, if the ovaries aren't working properly it can affect your menstrual cycle, leading to missed or irregular periods.

TRY THIS

If you are missing periods or they have gone haywire, speak to a



functional medicine practitioner who can advise you on nutrition and even do tests to check hormone levels.

Pippa Campbell offers a month-long DUTCH test to work out where your hormones are at – visit pippacampbellhealth.com.

2 Gut health

Up to one in five of us is thought to be affected by irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), which is often triggered by stress. Symptoms include stomach cramps, bloating, digestive issues and more.

When you're stressed, your body diverts energy away from digestion and your brain doesn't send the right signals to trigger the release of digestive juices. So, if you eat something, it's less likely to be digested well, leading to more bloating.

Food wise, eating oats is a good idea for most (though for some they cause bloating). Oats provide soluble fibre, which not only helps you stay regular, but also feeds the friendly bacteria in your gut. These good bacteria make a substance called butyrate, which keeps your gut lining healthy.

TRY THIS

Keep a food diary to see if certain foods are triggers, or you might find it's stressful situations that trigger an upset tummy. Acute stress can often bring on a bout of diarrhoea. Eat slowly to improve digestion (see page 32 for more on boosting gut health in general) and don't eat on the go – always sit. If you suffer from bloating and reflux, make sure to chew each mouthful 30 times to fully break down food before it hits your stomach. Try to eat in silence too as talking introduces air into your digestive tract, adding to bloating – I learned about this at Park Igls in Austria on a gut detox protocol, where we were encouraged to eat soup with a teaspoon and "chew" each mouthful 30-50 times (even soup!) You can find out more about Park Igls on the story highlight at [instagram.com/thehealtheditor](https://www.instagram.com/thehealtheditor).



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3 Dental health

If you're feeling stressed, anxious or burnt out, it's easy to let personal hygiene routines slip. But poor oral health can lead to cavities, ulcers and gum problems down the line. If you skip brushing, plaque will build up and this will increase your chances of needing emergency dental work.

Another way stress can affect teeth is through grinding or clenching. This often happens at night when you're not even aware of it. The proper name for this is bruxism. If you wake up and your jaw or teeth are aching, then you're probably doing this.

Other ways to know you're grinding is if you have chipped teeth and lack of enamel where the teeth bite together – I suffer from both, which is why I wear a little dental guard that fits over my two front teeth. It makes me look like a rabbit!

And if feeling stressed, it's also more likely you'll snack on unhealthy, sugary foods to relieve that stress. This can, of course, worsen tooth enamel and lead to cavities. Some people end up drinking more alcohol when stressed, and this too affects oral hygiene, with too much alcohol potentially leading to cavities and gum disease.

TRY THIS

Speak to your dentist if you are waking up with an aching jaw or painful teeth – he or she can make a mouth guard or splint to wear to protect your teeth.



Damages your skin

Stress can take its toll on your skin due to excess cortisol circulating in your system. A high level of the stress hormone cortisol over a long period will age your body in general and especially the skin, leading to wrinkles.

Raised cortisol creates inflammation, which can result in several skin issues including acne, eczema, dermatitis, psoriasis and rosacea.

Finding ways to reduce your stress levels will help your skin. You can also look for skincare containing anti-inflammatory ingredients, such as green tea, magnolia bark, and omega-3 oils. Niacinamide (vitamin B3) is also great for acne.

TRY THIS

Products containing collagen and hyaluronic acid (HA) are especially good for plumping up your skin. Retinol and its derivatives also help reduce lines and wrinkles but if it makes your skin too sensitive, try bakuchiol, which is a gentler, plant-based alternative.

Also, make sure you walk a few miles each day, preferably in the countryside. Being out in the fresh air not only reduces stress but also helps boost your circulation, leading to better-looking skin. And try a gua sha tool – often made of metal, jade or rose quartz – which can be massaged over the face with oil to release stress and tension and boost circulation.



5

YOUR HAIR

When you're stressed, your body tightens up and directs energy and blood away from your extremities and non-essential functions, including your scalp and hair. This leads to a lack of nutrients for your hair.

Too much cortisol can literally stop your hair from growing and push it into the resting phase, after which it falls out. This is known as telogen effluvium. You always have some strands about to fall out, but with a big stressful event it's more likely to push lots of strands into this resting phase. So, you'll likely see a large amount of hair shedding three months or so after the stressful event.

Stress also manifests as scalp tension. If your hair has ever "hurt" (you brush it and it feels painful) then your scalp is



most likely too tense. This cuts off circulation to your hair follicles, resulting in less hair growth or hair loss.

TRY THIS

When you wash your hair, spend a little more time massaging your scalp. Also, consider massaging in a nourishing hair oil before bed, and wrapping your hair in a towel or silk hair wrap overnight to nourish scalp skin and the hair follicles.

Brushing your hair regularly will also help relax your scalp and spread the essential sebum down the hair shafts.



6

Impacts on your sleep

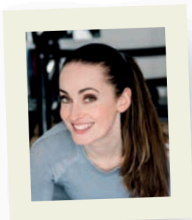
Stress is a normal reaction that helps keep you awake and alert but, when it becomes excessive, it can negatively impact your sleep. In a recent study by researchers at King's College London and Ipsos MORI, it was found that 50 per cent of the UK has had greater sleep disturbance since lockdown.

If you're under stress, your adrenocortical system is disrupted and this can result in sleep disruption and mood changes. Some people end up in a "stress-sleep cycle" where feelings of stress stop them achieving a good night's sleep, and, conversely, the

thought of not being able to sleep magnifies feelings of stress! To break this pattern, get into a good sleep routine.

TRY THIS

Before bed, wind down by reading a book and taking a bath with Epsom or magnesium salts – magnesium is known as the super-relaxer when it comes to minerals. Switch off your phone or wear blue light-blocking glasses after sundown. The blue light emitted from phones and computer screens signals to your body that it's still daytime.



Follow Katy's perimenopause journey at [katyperimenopause.substack.com](https://www.substack.com) and at [instagram.com/thehealtheditor](https://www.instagram.com/thehealtheditor).

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