

Stress Management

Effects of Stress

Stress causes changes in your body. It also affects your emotions.

How stress affects the body

Common symptoms of stress include:

- A fast heartbeat.
- A headache.
- A stiff neck and/or tight shoulders.
- Back pain.
- Fast breathing.
- Sweating, and sweaty palms.
- An upset stomach, nausea, or diarrhea.



Over time, stress can affect your:¹

- **Immune system.** Constant stress can make you more likely to get sick more often. And if you have a chronic illness such as AIDS, stress can make your symptoms worse.
- **Heart.** Stress is linked to high blood pressure, abnormal heartbeat (arrhythmia), blood clots, and hardening of the arteries (atherosclerosis). It's also linked to coronary artery disease, heart attack, and heart failure.
- **Muscles.** Constant tension from stress can lead to neck, shoulder, and low back pain. Stress may make rheumatoid arthritis worse.
- **Stomach.** If you have stomach problems, such as gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD), peptic ulcer disease, or irritable bowel syndrome, stress can make your symptoms worse.
- **Reproductive organs.** Stress is linked to low fertility, erection problems, problems during pregnancy, and painful menstrual periods.
- **Lungs.** Stress can make symptoms of asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) worse.
- **Skin.** Skin problems such as acne and psoriasis are made worse by stress.

An extreme reaction to stress is a **panic attack**. A panic attack is a sudden, intense fear or anxiety that may make you feel short of breath, dizzy, or make your heart pound. People who have panic attacks may

feel out of control, like they are having a heart attack, or are about to die. Panic attacks may happen with no clear cause, but they can be brought on by living with high levels of stress for a long time. For more information on panic attacks, see the topic [Panic Attacks and Panic Disorder](#).

How stress affects your thoughts and emotions

You might notice signs of stress in the way you think, act, and feel. You may:

- Feel cranky and unable to deal with even small problems.
- Feel frustrated, lose your temper more often, and yell at others for no reason.
- Feel jumpy or tired all the time.
- Find it hard to focus on tasks.
- Worry too much about small things.
- Feel that you are missing out on things because you can't act quickly.
- Imagine that bad things are happening or about to happen.

How stress affects you depends on many things, such as:

- Your personality.
- What you have learned from your family about responding to stress.
- How you think about and handle stress.
- Your [coping strategies](#) (What is a [PDF](#) document?).
- Your social support.

The type of stress matters

Stress can affect you both instantly (acute stress) and over time (chronic stress).

Acute (short-term) stress is the body's instant response to any situation that seems demanding or dangerous. Your stress level depends on how intense the stress is, how long it lasts, and how you cope with the situation.

Most of the time, your body recovers quickly from acute stress. But stress can cause problems if it happens too often or if your body doesn't have a chance to recover. In people with heart problems, acute stress can trigger an abnormal heartbeat ([arrhythmia](#)) or even a [heart attack](#).

Chronic (long-term) stress is caused by stressful situations or events that last over a long period of time. This could include having a difficult job or dealing with a chronic disease. If you already have a health problem, stress can make it worse.

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