

# Protect your heart by relieving stress

*Stress is associated with high blood pressure and other contributors to heart disease. Learn how to recognize and manage the problem.*

**S**tress can have a significant impact on your physical health. Although research has not yet found it to be an independent risk factor for cardiovascular disease (CVD), stress has been linked with conditions such as high blood pressure and abnormal cholesterol levels, known contributors to CVD. Protect your heart health by keeping your stress at a manageable level.

## Recognizing stress

Your mind and body will send warning signs if you're experiencing an unhealthy level of stress. Be alert for these signals:

- Aches or tension in your head, neck, jaw, or back
- Feeling angry, anxious, irritable, or tense
- Upset stomach, racing heart, sweaty palms, skin rashes
- Difficulty falling asleep or sleeping through the night
- Feeling overwhelmed or unable to cope
- Decreased energy level, feeling tired or fatigued

## Detrimental effects

“Physiological responses caused by stress include increased heart rate and blood pressure and endo-

### WHAT YOU CAN DO

Many local hospitals and health centers offer stress-management programs—check to see what's available in your area. Or see if there's a community self-help or support group. If you're not comfortable in a group setting, individual counseling might be your best option.

thelial dysfunction,” says Leslie Cho, MD, a cardiologist at Cleveland Clinic. Endothelial dysfunction occurs in the endothelium, the cells that line the inner surface of all blood vessels. These cells affect blood coagulation, platelet adhesion, immune function, and other processes that are key to maintaining arterial health and preventing atherosclerosis. In addition, says Dr. Cho, people who are stressed are at increased risk of metabolic syndrome, which involves having at least three of the following conditions: obesity, insulin resistance, hypertension, and hyperlipidemia.

Sometimes, stress prompts unhealthy behaviors, such as overeating, smoking, increase in alcohol or drug use, and physical inactivity. Stress also may have other manifestations, such as feelings of anxiety and depression.

“Extremely disruptive stressors, such as loss of a child, spouse, or job, are more likely to cause cardiac problems,” explains Gary Francis, MD, head of clinical cardiology at Cleveland Clinic. “However, all stress doesn't weigh the same. And some stress serves a positive purpose—you need some stress to keep you on edge and alert.”

## Stress-management strategies

How do you keep your stress levels in check? Dr. Cho suggests physical exercise, meditation, and active involvement in a social network. A variety of relaxation exercises also can help. Specific stress reduction tools include:

- **Deep breathing.** Sit comfortably in a quiet place. Close your mouth and



Activities such as canoeing, walking or biking, especially with others, are great ways to rid your body and mind of stress.

breathe in through your nose. Inhale deeply and slowly while counting to three, then exhale through your nose to a count of three. Continue deep, slow breathing until you feel your muscles relax.

- **Physical exercise.** Take a time-out and move your body for 30 minutes. Do something that doesn't feel like a chore. Walking and biking both afford opportunities to appreciate nature. Or stay inside, put on some music, and dance in your living room.
- **Socializing.** Isolation allows you to ruminate about your problems. Spend quality time with people you enjoy. Listening to others talk about their challenges may give you some much-needed perspective.
- **Progressive muscle relaxation.** Begin by tensing all of the muscles in your face and holding for 10 seconds, then relax and let your muscles go slack. Repeat tensing and relaxing the muscles in various parts of your body, such as neck, shoulders, arms, abdomen, and legs.

While stressful events sometimes happen unexpectedly, Dr. Francis suggests preparation whenever possible: “Anticipate what might be stressful and plan for it.” 📖