



## Take Control of Your Stress and Stay Healthier

When you experience stress, your brain signals your body to sharpen its senses, increase the pulse, breathe deeper, and tense the muscles. You're ready to take action! If the stress is short-term, your body returns to equilibrium after the stress passes. Scientists have discovered, though, that if you're chronically stressed, the part of the brain that controls the stress response is constantly pumping out a lot of stress hormones. In situations of chronic stress, your immune cells are less able to respond to invading bacteria or a virus, making you more susceptible to sickness and disease. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), healthcare costs are nearly 50% greater for employees who report

high levels of stress. It's now widely believed that job stress increases the risk of cardiovascular disease, certain psychological disorders, and musculoskeletal disorders of the back and upper extremities. Stress may also worsen existing health problems and interfere with their treatment. Personal factors (e.g., family problems, inadequate sleep, unhealthy diet, or inactivity) can also increase the risk of stress-related health problems.

People with high-levels of short-term stress or chronic stress have a prolonged healing time, a decreased ability of their immune systems to respond to vaccination, and an increased susceptibility to viral infections like the common cold, according to NIH researcher Esther Sternberg, MD. "If you're too stressed, your performance falls off," she says, and you are more susceptible to disease. "But your goal should be to try to learn to control your

stress to make it work for you," Dr. Sternberg says. "Don't just think of getting rid of your stress – think of turning it to your advantage."

- Identify what causes you stress (e.g., marital problems, conflict at work, illness in the family).
- Take action! If something can be solved, take control and solve it! Ask for help from your boss or your spouse, if needed, to make positive changes.
- Take a time-out. If you feel stressed, give yourself a break. Allow some down time, even if it is only a 30-second time-out.
- Manage your time wisely. Learn how to be organized and to not procrastinate.
- Decide what is important to you, and say "No" to commitments that don't fit your priorities.

*National Institutes of Health & Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.*

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## How to Improve Your Quality of Life

Everyone wants to enjoy life. A new study has identified the two lifestyle practices that erode quality of life more than anything else: excessive body weight and smoking. Researchers looked at individuals who already had health problems, such as diabetes or coronary heart disease. After adjusting for any diseases they had, in most cases obesity was a more significant factor in decreased quality of life than their original health problem.

In another study, researchers focused on quality of life and activity levels in a group of 430 sedentary women who were all overweight and had elevated blood pressure. A third of the women reported a history of depression and 18% were currently taking medication for depression.

The women were randomly divided into 4 groups. One group (the control group) made no changes to their activity levels, but the women in the other 3 groups

increased their activity levels by 1.5 hours per week, 2.25 hours per week, and 3 hours or more of physical activity per week. After 6 months, all of the women in the activity groups showed improvement in quality-of-life measures, including physical health, social health, and mental health. The more active they were, the more they improved – whether they lost weight or not. Those women in the control group (inactive) had no improvement in their quality of life.

If you want to feel good and enjoy life, you need to live healthfully: Avoid smoking, be physically active (the greater the activity, the greater the improvement), eat well, and maintain a healthy weight. These are key factors for enjoying a high quality of life – both physically and mentally.

*American Heart Journal. Feb. 2010.*

*Archives of Internal Medicine. Feb. 2009.*



## Prevent Low Back Pain

Low back pain is the second most common cause of disability in the United States – and it's on the rise. A recent survey found that in the last 14 years, the prevalence of low back pain has more than doubled. Why?

- ▶ **Increasing rates of obesity.** Obesity puts additional strain on the back and limits physical activity, which is needed for maintaining strong stomach and back muscles.
- ▶ **Changes in work life.** Today, most people in the workforce sit through the day, which can be hard on the back.
- ▶ **Decreased fitness levels** in the general population.
- ▶ **Increased rates of depression.** One study showed that people who developed depression were 3 times more likely to develop chronic back pain in the next 2 years than those without depression.

Maintaining a healthy weight and getting regular physical activity, such as walking or swimming daily coupled with strength training, can help improve your back health.

*Archives of Internal Medicine. Feb. 2009.*

Here are some tips for preventing back pain, offered by the American Academy of Family Physicians.

### How to Lift

- ✓ Don't lift by bending over. Lift an object by bending your knees and squatting to pick up the object. Keep your back straight and hold the object close to your body. Avoid twisting your body while lifting.
- ✓ Push rather than pull when you need to move heavy objects.



### How to Sit

- ✓ Sit in chairs with straight backs or low-back support. Keep your knees a little higher than your hips. Adjust the seat or use a low stool to prop your feet on. Turn by moving your whole body rather than by twisting at the waist.
- ✓ When driving, sit straight and move the seat forward. This helps you not lean forward to reach the controls. You may want to put a small pillow or rolled towel behind your lower back if you must drive or sit for a long time.



- ✓ If you must sit at your desk or at the wheel of a car or truck for long hours, break up the time with stops to stretch.

### How to Stand

- ✓ If you must stand for long periods, rest 1 foot on a low stool to relieve pressure on your lower back. Every 5 to 15 minutes, switch the foot you're resting on the stool. Maintain good posture: Keep your ears, shoulders and hips in a straight line, with your head up and your stomach pulled in.
- ✓ Wear flat shoes or shoes with low heels (1 inch or lower).



### How to Sleep

- ✓ The best way to sleep is on your side with your knees bent. You can put a pillow under your head to support your neck. You can also put a pillow between your knees.
- ✓ If you sleep on your back, put pillows under your knees and a small pillow under your lower back. Don't sleep on your stomach unless you put a pillow under your hips.

*American Academy of Family Physicians. 2010.*

## Everyday Ways to Manage Stress (continued from page 1)

- Stay active. Go for a walk, run, or bike ride.
- Eat well. Eating regular meals and taking time to enjoy them will make you feel better. (Nope. Eating in the car on the way to work doesn't count!)
- Laugh! It can make you feel good — and that good feeling can stay with you even after the laughter stops.
- Get involved. Get involved in activities that support your community. It can help put your own problems into perspective.
- Get plenty of sleep. Fatigue and stress usually go hand in hand. Aim for 7-8 hours daily.
- Keep connected. Stay around people who are caring and positive.
- Avoid drugs and alcohol. Drugs and alcohol may seem to help with the stress temporarily. But in the long run they create additional problems that compound the stress you are already feeling.
- Don't sweat the small stuff! Pick a few really important things and let the rest slide.
- Journal. Write things down to get them off of your chest.
- Find support. Ask for help from a health professional, your pastor, or your boss. Join a support group.

*U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.*

## ASK THE WELLNESS DOCTOR

**Q:** I am a plump 63-year-old woman. It doesn't seem to matter how much I starve myself. My weight stays the same. Do you have any suggestions?

**A:** Go to [www.wellsource.info/wn/ask-postmenopauseWeight.pdf](http://www.wellsource.info/wn/ask-postmenopauseWeight.pdf) to read the answer from Don Hall, DrPH, CHES.

To ask your question, email: [paulaw@wellsource.com](mailto:paulaw@wellsource.com), subject line: Ask the Wellness Doctor. Emails with any other subject line will be directed to the spam folder.

**Health Challenge:** "Be Smoke Free" available at: [www.wellsource.info/wn/hc-SmokeFree.pdf](http://www.wellsource.info/wn/hc-SmokeFree.pdf). Make it a priority to avoid all secondhand smoke. If you smoke, make a plan and quit smoking this month.