

Stress - It's not ALL in your head

Written by Nicole Winbush MD

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Everyone deals with stress. It is an inescapable part of our life. However, unrecognized and unmanaged it has the potential to make us very sick. Stress is the feeling we have from the real or perceived demands in our life. The feeling of stress is the result of the way our body's chemicals and nerves respond to a possible threat. Stress is a helpful instinct that gets us moving when we are under a clear challenge.

Our bodies however, are not designed to live in a constant state of heightened stress. Every aspect of our functioning is affected by chronic stress. Some of the more commonly known effects of stress are elevated blood pressure, headaches and poor sleep etc. This week we look at other effects of chronic stress on our bodies.

Cortisol is a major stress hormone (chemical messenger) in our body. When we are stressed our cortisol levels are higher and can often cause negative effects that include:

Joint and muscle pain. Elevated levels of cortisol can cause inflammation (irritation) which can over time lead to decreased muscle and bone and damage the connective tissues of our body. It is not uncommon for people with chronic stress to have issues with muscle aches and joint pains. These high levels of stress hormone impair the body's ability to heal from injury or surgery. Over time, chronically elevated levels of stress can actually cause you to lose your muscles and replace this tissue with fat.

Poor memory, depression and anxiety. High levels of stress hormones are damaging to the brain centers that are involved with memory and concentration. When you are chronically stressed, it is very difficult to remember information or remain focused on what you are doing. In addition, high stress hormone levels are associated with elevated levels of depression and anxiety.

Poor energy and problems fighting infections. Your thyroid (the bow-tie shaped gland that is located in your throat) has important roles to play in regulating your weight and your energy. Stress affects the functioning of this gland and related hormones. When your thyroid does not work well common symptoms can include: hair loss, weight gain and poor energy to name just a few. In addition, high stress levels can make it harder for your body to fight off infections. We all have had the experience of getting sick when we have not been able to take care of ourselves or know people who get cold sores whenever they are under stress.

Weight gain. High levels of stress hormone make you more likely to gain weight and directly affect your body's use and storage of fats leading you to store fat around your middle. Also, as mentioned above the effects on the thyroid gland and energy levels make you more likely to gain weight and less likely to have energy to feel like exercising. This weight gain can increase your risk of developing diabetes or make the diabetes you may already have more difficult to treat.

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Digestive problems. Stress hormones decrease the speed with which your stomach digests and empties food into your intestines. Stress can cause you to feel bloated, worsen indigestion, and reflux. When under chronic stress, your intestines may move food through too quickly, not allowing your body to absorb the nutrients that it needs and causing cramping, pain and diarrhea.

Chronic fatigue, Fibromyalgia and Chronic Dizziness. Stressing the body over time impairs the body's ability to keep making cortisol. Any system that is taxed for too long, can eventually give out. It is possible that chronic fatigue, fibromyalgia and chronic dizziness (where no other cause has been found) may be due to such a state.

As you can see, chronic stress can affect virtually every aspect of your physical and mental functioning. However, we do not need to feel powerless. There are many things that you can do to manage your stressors and regain balance and improved function in your life. Next week I will discuss strategies for exploring and managing the sources of stress in your life. Until then, spend some time thinking about how your health may be affected by stress and what changes you are willing to make to feel and function better.

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Dr. Winbush is a family physician practicing at NorthPoint Health and Wellness Center. She has a strong interest in wellness and patient education to help individuals feel empowered to optimize their health and functioning. For more information, to leave suggestions for future articles and for additional resources as mentioned in the article visit www.functionwellmedicine.com.