

The Stress Spectrum:

Understanding Its Effects on Your Body and Mind



Stress is a normal part of life, but too much can have serious health consequences. This leaflet aims to help you understand what stress is, how it affects the body, and the difference between acute and chronic stress. By gaining a deeper understanding of stress, you can better manage its impact on your life.

WHAT IS STRESS?

Stress is the body's reaction to any change that requires an adjustment or response. It can be physical, mental, or emotional and can come from both positive and negative experiences. When you feel threatened, your nervous system responds by releasing a flood of stress hormones, including adrenaline and cortisol, which prepare the body for emergency action. This is often referred to as the "fight or flight" response. This response can be helpful in situations of immediate danger, but when it's triggered too often or for too long, it can take a toll on your health.

THE PHYSICAL IMPACT OF STRESS

Stress can have a wide range of physical effects. In the short term, it can increase your heart rate, speed

up your breathing, and boost your energy, preparing you to face the perceived threat. However, prolonged stress can lead to a variety of health problems.

- **Heart disease:** Chronic stress, or long-term stress, can cause serious heart issues like high blood pressure, heart attacks, and other cardiovascular problems. Over time, the constant state of heightened alertness can strain your heart, leading to long-term damage.
- **Digestive problems:** Stress can affect the way food moves through the body, leading to diarrhoea or constipation. It can also lead to stomach aches and nausea. Over time, this can disrupt your body's nutrient absorption and lead to other health problems.
- **Immune system:** Chronic stress can weaken your immune system, making you more susceptible to infections and diseases. It can also slow down your body's ability to heal, leading to longer recovery times after illness or injury.
- **Mental health issues:** Chronic stress is linked to mental health disorders like depression and anxiety. It can also lead to other psychological issues like insomnia, headaches, and memory problems.

ACUTE VS. CHRONIC STRESS

Acute stress is short-term stress that goes away quickly. You feel it when you slam on the brakes, have a fight with



your partner, or ski down a steep slope. It helps you manage dangerous situations. It also occurs when you do something new or exciting.

Chronic stress, on the other hand, is stress that lasts for a longer period of time. You may have chronic stress if you have money problems, an unhappy marriage, or trouble at work. Any type of stress that goes on for weeks or months is chronic stress. You can become so used to chronic stress that you don't realise it is a problem. If you don't find ways to manage stress, it may lead to health problems.

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF STRESS

Stress doesn't just affect your body - it can also have a significant impact on your mind. It can lead to emotional problems like depression, anxiety, and panic attacks. It can also cause irritability, anger, and restlessness. Over time, chronic stress can lead to serious mental health problems like depression and anxiety disorders. It can also affect your ability to think clearly, make decisions, and concentrate, impacting your performance at work or school.

CONCLUSION

Understanding stress and its impact on your health is the first step towards managing it effectively. Recognising the signs of stress and knowing how to reduce or manage it can greatly improve your overall well-being. In the following leaflets, we will explore various stress management techniques and strategies tailored to different life situations.

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