

Heart Disease and Stress: What's the Link?

Written by [WebMD Editorial Contributors](#)

Medically Reviewed by [James Beckerman, MD, FACC](#) on March 08, 2021

Living with too much stress, for too long, is bad for your [heart](#).

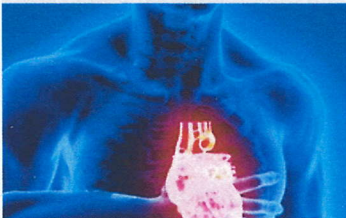
If you're often stressed, and you don't have good ways to manage it, you are more likely to have heart disease, high blood pressure, [chest pain](#), or irregular heartbeats.

Chronic stress itself can be a problem. It raises your [blood pressure](#), and it's not good for your body to constantly be exposed to stress hormones. Studies also link stress to changes in the way [blood clots](#), which makes a [heart attack](#) more likely.

The way you handle stress also matters. If you respond to it in unhealthy ways -- such as smoking, overeating, or not exercising -- that makes matters worse. On the other hand, if you [exercise](#), connect with people, and find meaning despite the stress, that makes a difference in your emotions and in your body.

You may also want to:

- Change what you can to lower your stress.
- Accept that there are some things you cannot control.
- Before you agree to do something, consider whether you can really do it. It's OK to say "no" to requests that will add more stress to your life.
- Stay connected with people you love.
- Make it a point to relax every day. You could read a book, listen to music, meditate, pray, do [yoga](#) or [tai chi](#), journal, or reflect on what is good in your life.
- Be active! When you exercise, you'll burn off some of your stress and be better prepared to handle problems.



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Can Stress Cause Death?



Medically reviewed by [Lori Lawrenz, PsyD](#) — By Michael Ashworth, Ph.D. on June 29, 2022

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While stress is a natural response to perceived danger, chronic stress can lead to physical and mental health complications and early death.

Stress is a natural response to new, challenging, or threatening situations. Experiencing stress is part of being alive, but it can become overwhelming, causing daily dysfunction and even leading to serious health complications.

Stress itself is not a problem, but it becomes a problem when it's left to run rampant and starts holding you back from experiencing your full potential.

For example, the stress of taking a test can help motivate a person to study, show up on time, and work their hardest to succeed. But if stress isn't something you know how to handle, cope with, or control, it can work in the opposite way.

In the above example, pre-test stress may escalate into full-blown test anxiety and limit your ability to study, arrive on time, and finish the task.

Stress is a response that is supposed to peak and resolve. It is not supposed to go on endlessly (i.e., after the test, the feelings of test stress should resolve).

If your stress response continues after the fact, and if it [goes unmanaged](#) (i.e., becomes chronic), it can lead to mental and [physical health problems](#), including anxiety and depression, heart disease, and even death.

How stress affects the body

[Stress](#) affects every part of the body, and this is why it's felt physically and mentally.

According to the [American Psychological Association](#), short-term stress affects all systems including:

- **Musculoskeletal** (ie., muscle tightening and tension)
- **Respiratory** (ie., rapid breathing or shallow breathing)
- **Cardiovascular**(ie., heart rate increase, blood pressure increase)
- **Endocrine, gastrointestinal, nervous, and reproductive:** stress hormone release, [flight or fight response](#) kicks into gear

These natural responses are designed to peak and drop. When they don't, diseases can occur in relation to the overstimulation of the stress response.

Diseases caused by stress

While short-term stress can enhance the immune system's response, it's well known that [chronic stress](#) puts a major strain on the immune system. Chronic stress also creates structural brain changes that impact functioning.

A [2021 research review](#) ¹ demonstrated the following diseases and illnesses are directly associated with chronic stress:

- [anxiety](#)
- [depression](#)
- pain
- [fatigue](#)

Chronic stress is associated with the following health conditions:

- heart disease and dysfunction (including arrhythmia and heart attack)
- digestive disorders
- memory disorders
- diabetes
- cancer (particularly breast tumor development)

Many people may look at the impact of stress on health and quality of life and wonder, is stress the number one killer? As it's directly associated with the six leading causes of death, stress can be called a silent killer.

A [2021 study](#) shows that physical and mental stressors can lead to sudden cardiac death (SCD). So stress can cause sudden death by a heart attack, but it can contribute to prolonged health complications, like [substance use disorder](#), leading to early death.

For example, if a person learns to cope with stress by using drugs or alcohol, this also increases the risk of associated health complications and early death. Stress is a risk factor in substance use disorders.

Work-related stress is a direct factor in around [120,000 people's deaths](#) every year. As it's unlikely for "stress" to be listed as the cause of death, though, the real number may be much higher if we were to peel back causes behind, for example, SCD.

Another [study](#), published in the journal *Circulation: Cardiovascular Quality and Outcomes*, shows a nearly 50 percent increased risk of early death due to chronic stress and depression compared to lower levels of stress and depression.

The following leading causes of death are linked in some way to how stress manifests into illness and worsens symptoms of chronic conditions.

The six leading causes of death in the U.S. that are impacted by emotional stress are:

- heart disease
- cancer
- lung ailments and respiratory disorder
- accidental injuries
- cirrhosis of the liver
- [suicide](#)

Recap

Temporary or short-term stress is not a bad thing. It's a natural and healthy response to a perceived threat. No matter the cause, stress affects every system that keeps your body and brain functioning.

So when stress doesn't resolve, it can create physical and mental health problems, including structural changes to your brain and dysfunction in the immune system.

Chronic stress is not good for the body. It's a known risk factor for a range of illnesses and diseases including psychiatric illnesses, heart disease, diabetes, and even cancerous tumor development.

attack, or prolonged health issues that create wear and tear on your body and mind. Chronic stress can also lead to accidental injury and an increased risk of suicide.

Stress does not cause death, but it directly contributes to sudden and early death. There are ways you can [learn to manage stress](#) on your own, or you can speak to a [mental health professional](#) for guidance. Help is always available.

Article Resources

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