Stress Can Increase Your Risk for Heart Disease

Stress is a normal part of life. Stress can come from physical causes like not getting enough sleep or having an illness. Another cause for stress can be emotional, worrying about not having enough money or the death of a loved one. Stress can also come from less dramatic causes like everyday obligations and pressures that make you feel that you are not in control.

Your body’s response to stress is supposed to protect you. But, if it is constant, it can harm you. The hormone cortisol is released in response to stress. Studies suggest that the high levels of cortisol from long-term stress can increase blood cholesterol, triglycerides, and blood pressure. These are common risk factors for heart disease.

This stress can also cause changes that promote the buildup of plaque deposits in the arteries.

Even minor stress can trigger heart problems like myocardial ischemia. This is a condition in which the heart doesn't get enough blood or oxygen. And, long-term stress can affect how the blood clots. This makes the blood stickier and increases the risk of stroke.

In addition, people who have a lot of stress may smoke or choose other unhealthy ways to deal with stress.

What to do

People respond to stressful situations differently. Some react strongly to a situation. Others are relaxed and unconcerned. Luckily, you can decrease the effect of stress on your body. First, identify situations that cause stress. Although difficult, try to control your mental and physical reactions to these stressful situations. Try the following to help manage stress and keep your heart healthy.

**Get plenty of exercise**

Exercise can help counteract the harmful effects of stress. For heart health, aim for at least 30 minutes, 5 days a week.

Exercise can help to improve cardiovascular health by controlling weight, improving lipid levels (blood fats), and lowering blood pressure.

Exercise has another benefit that lowers stress. People who exercise have a reduced physical response to stress. Their blood pressure and heart rates don't go up as high as people under stress who don't exercise.

Regular exercise can also reduce the risk of depression, another risk factor for heart disease.

Need exercise motivation? Get a pedometer and try to walk 10,000 steps to 12,000 steps per day. This may also help you maintain your weight. With a pedometer, you get instant feedback and credit for all you do, such as taking the stairs instead of the elevator.

**Build a strong support system**

Research suggests that having a strong support network like being married, having someone you can talk to and trust, or belonging to organizations or a religion can reduce your stress level and your risk of heart disease.

If you already have heart disease, this same network can help reduce your risk for heart attack. Having at least one person you can rely on takes a heavy burden off you and provides comfort.

A strong support system helps you take better care of yourself, too. Research shows that a lack of social support increases the chance of engaging in unhealthy behaviors like smoking, eating a high-fat diet, and drinking too much alcohol.

**Seek treatment for constant depression or anxiety**

Depression and anxiety can increase your risk of dying from heart disease, if you already have it.

In one study, people were asked whether they had felt so sad, discouraged, or hopeless during the past month that they had wondered if anything was worthwhile. Those who answered yes had more than two times the risk for coronary artery disease.

Other studies suggest that long-term anxiety can increase the risk for sudden cardiac death. To reduce your anxiety level, try activities that reduce stress like yoga, walking meditation, traditional meditation, guided imagery, or other methods. Look for classes in your area. Talk with your provider if you have feelings of depression or anxiety and ask about medications that can help.

**Reduce stress from work**

Studies show having a demanding job that offers you few opportunities to make decisions or provides little reward can increase your risk for heart disease.

Stress at work becomes even more of a problem when you don't have a strong support system or you have long-term anxiety.

If you can't find a different position within your company, do what you can to gain control over your environment. Try to take some time every day away from work. Do something that is relaxing and that you enjoy. It may be reading, walking, or deep breathing.

If you think you are at an increased risk for heart disease because of stress in your life, talk with your health care provider. He or she may recommend counseling, classes, or other programs to help you lower your stress level and your risk for heart disease.