

What is stress?

The World Health Organisation defines stress as “[a state of worry or mental tension caused by a difficult situation](#)”.

When you experience stress, your body responds in a particular way. Your sympathetic nervous system is activated by your brain straight away, resulting in the release of adrenaline and noradrenaline. These travel in the bloodstream affecting different parts of your body, putting it on alert. Your heart rate speeds up, your heart beats faster, you become more alert, and blood flow to your muscles increases. This response prepares you, in a few seconds, to run away from the difficult situation or to stand up to it. This is called your flight or fight response.

At the same time, your brain triggers the release of cortisol, which travels throughout your body in your blood. Cortisol causes the release of glucose into the bloodstream, which is used by the muscles and brain as energy to help deal with the difficult situation.

Your body's response to stress can help you to cope with the difficult situation that's causing it. But if you're not able to change the situation and stress goes on for a long time or is repeated too often, or if your stress response is activated unnecessarily (without a difficult situation), then it can cause problems with your physical and mental health.

How common is stress?

About [three out of every five Australians](#) experience at least one episode of stress over the course of a year, with no difference between males and females. However, 35% of females report 'always' or 'often' feeling rushed for time, compared to 30% of males. People with mental illness or chronic disease are more likely to experience stress than people without these conditions.

What are the signs and symptoms of stress?

The signs of stress include increased blood pressure, breathing rate and heart rate. Dilation of the pupils and sweating also occur as part of the stress response.

[Symptoms of stress](#) include:

- Heart palpitations
- Fatigue
- Problems sleeping
- An upset stomach
- Headaches
- Diarrhea
- Muscle aches

- Worry
- Fear
- Anger
- Irritability
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Feeling helpless
- Problems concentrating
- Poor memory
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Tearfulness
- [Loss of libido \(sex drive\)](#)

Stress can make existing health problems worse or lead to new health problems.

Stress can [alter your behaviour](#), so you might find yourself:

- Drinking alcohol more than usual
- Eating too much or not enough
- Acting impulsively
- Exercising less, or to excess

What causes stress?

All sorts of things can cause stress. [Common stressors](#) are things like:

- Natural disasters such as hurricanes, bushfires or floods
- Transport or industrial accidents
- Life events like marriage, divorce, job loss, moving house, loss of a loved one
- Bullying or harassment at work or school
- Violence, abuse or neglect
- Memories of past trauma

Whether or not you are stressed by things depends on your coping strategies, resilience, support, and the degree of control you have over the difficult situation. The same difficult situation may be stressful for one person but motivating for another.

How is stress diagnosed?

Stress is not a disease as such, although psychologists may diagnose acute stress disorder or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in people exposed to life-threatening

or extreme (often repeated) traumatic events.

Stress may be the cause of symptoms that prompt you to visit your doctor, or it might be noticed by your doctor during a routine check-up.

How is stress treated?

Relaxation techniques like meditation, breathing exercises, spending time in nature, mindfulness activities or yoga can help to relieve stress.

Maintaining good health can help with managing stress. Eating well, doing enough physical activity, limiting alcohol consumption and not smoking will not only help with stress, they will also help you minimise your risk of disease.

Having someone to talk to can relieve stress, whether that's a friend, family member or therapist.

Cognitive behavioural therapy, which involves learning how your thoughts influence your emotions and behaviours, can help to change the way you think about, and respond to, difficult situations.

What does stress mean for my health?

If stress is severe enough, repeated or prolonged, it can disturb the regulation of your nervous system, immune system and hormones, and affect the expression of genes in the cells of your body, in ways that cause health problems.

Stress can increase your risk of developing disease and make existing disease worse. Cortisol has [lots of effects throughout the body](#), including on the brain, the immune system, [the reproductive system](#), [the kidneys](#), and [the gut](#).

Health conditions associated with stress include:

- Chronic pain and fatigue syndromes
- Obesity
- Long-term inflammation
- Type 2 diabetes
- High blood pressure
- Atherosclerosis (build-up of fatty plaques in the arteries)
- Stroke
- Heart attack
- Osteoporosis
- Cancer
- Allergies
- Susceptibility to infection
- Immune disorders

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Eating disorders
- Post-traumatic stress disorder
- Infertility

The effect of stress on health behaviours, such as exercise, eating, and the use of alcohol and other drugs, also contributes to increased disease.

What questions should I ask my doctor about stress?

- Who can you recommend, to help me with my stress?
- Could stress be contributing to my health problems?
- Could my health problems be contributing to my stress?
- Are there changes to my lifestyle that might help me deal with stress?

Email these questions to yourself to take into your doctor's appointment.

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Send

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