

# Stress

[getthehearthealthy.ca/stress-your-health](http://getthehearthealthy.ca/stress-your-health)

In this section you will learn:

- What stress is and how the body responds to it
- The impacts of long-term stress on your health
- Strategies to manage your stress

## The Stress Response

- Stress is something that affects everyone in some form; it is how you respond to the stress that impacts your health.
- When you encounter a stressor, your body releases hormones, which trigger a “fight or flight” response. This response prepares your body to react to the perceived danger.
- Some of the physical effects of this response include increased heart rate, increased breathing rate, increased blood pressure, tunnel vision, nausea, reduced ability to concentrate, and muscle tension.

## Health Impacts of Long-Term Stress



### Brain

Difficulty concentrating, impaired memory, anxiety, depression, irritability, disordered sleep



### Heart

Elevated heart rate and blood pressure, increased risk of heart attack and stroke, arrhythmias



### Skin

Hair loss, brittle nails, dry skin, acne



### Immune System

Decreased immune function, increased risk of becoming ill, prolonged recovery time



### Digestion

Ulcers, irritable bowels, reflux, nausea, weight fluctuations, diarrhea



### Reproductive System

Decreased hormone production, reduced sex drive, reduced fertility



### Joints and Muscles

Inflammation, tension, reduced bone density

Stress hormones can impact your internal hunger cues, which may cause you to crave high calorie foods or to experience a loss of appetite. Long-term changes to exercise and eating habits can lead to unhealthy changes in body weight and waist circumference.

## Stress Management Strategies

**Regular physical activity and exercise:** Each week, aim to complete 150 to 300 minutes of cardio-based exercise, and at least two days of resistance training. Exercise can help to release muscle tension and refocus your mind.

**Deep breathing exercises:** Movement of the diaphragm stimulates anti-stress hormone production in the brain, promoting relaxation.

**Meditate:** Help re-focus and re-train your mind on more positive thoughts and images.

**Communicate:** Talk to a friend, family member, or trained professional to help you find solutions to your stress.

**Engage in social activities, hobbies or recreational activities:** Setting aside time to participate in activities that you enjoy can help you cope more effectively with stress.

**Prioritize sleep:** Aim to get seven to nine hours of quality sleep each night. Improving your sleep hygiene can improve your immune system function, thinking patterns, and memory.

### Try Belly Breathing!

- Sit or lie in a comfortable position.
- Place one hand on your belly and the other on your chest.
- Take a slow, deep breath in through your nose, feeling your belly move outward.
- Exhale slowly through your mouth, feeling your belly fall.

### Ask Yourself

What causes you stress?  
What stress management strategies work best for you?  
Have you tried belly breathing?  
Would you like to speak with your Exercise Therapist  
about a Psychology referral?