

# THE HUGE PHYSICAL AND MENTAL COST OF STRESS

## FIRSTLY, LET'S DEFINE GOOD AND BAD STRESS, BECAUSE THERE'S A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THEM.

Good stress drives us to accomplish things: getting up in the morning, exercising, and fulfilling our responsibilities. Bad stress is different and includes us feeling a lack of control over something that is important to us, feeling time-poor, or being unfairly treated. The underlying factor in relation to bad stress is the feeling that we can't cope with or manage whatever it is that we are facing. When this type of stress is prolonged, we call it 'chronic stress.'

### DOES FEELING STRESSED SERVE A PURPOSE?

Imagine being in a forest where you know there are tigers lurking and then hearing a rustle in the bushes. Our stress response system was meant to respond very quickly under these circumstances to ensure our survival. This stress response is only meant to last from between 30 to 60 seconds, because within that time, whatever was in the bushes would have eaten us, or we would have escaped it. Today, however, most of our stress comes from what we think and worry about. So, most of our stress today is psychological, but we still experience the physical and mental response, as if there's a tiger in the bushes - even though it's only our thoughts 'threatening' us.

### STRESS IS 'EXPENSIVE' TO OUR BODY AND BRAIN

Remember the flush over your whole body when you narrowly missed an accident? This is the result of the message from your brain telling your adrenal glands to pump glucose into your muscles to give your muscles energy to either fight or run away from the threat. For us to create the adrenaline hormone, several specific nutrients are required. If your brain is constantly sending messages to make adrenaline, which becomes a message to make cortisol when you feel stressed all the time, then your body is using a lot of these nutrients to create these stress hormones. Many of the same nutrients are required to make energy.

### THESE SPECIFIC NUTRIENTS ....

Nutrients used to make adrenaline and cortisol are B vitamins, vitamin C, iron, magnesium, selenium, and zinc, among others. Many of these nutrients are also required to make other hormones you need, like oestrogen, progesterone and testosterone, and ones that help your cells use energy efficiently. Ongoing stress will therefore leave you feeling tired and poorly rested after sleep, because the nutrients required to make stress hormones take precedence over those that provide energy and allow you to feel calm and sleep well.



### WHAT DO YOU EAT WHEN YOU'RE STRESSED?

Different people respond differently to stress, but many people reach for highly refined foods that contain lots of sugar and/or fat. These factory foods lead to a quick release of energy, which makes you feel energetic quickly, but also stops the stress response for a little while. Over time eating these kinds of foods becomes a habit as you associate feeling energetic and less stressed with these kinds of foods. Another reason that you may gravitate to these kinds of foods is that poor sleep drives the desire for a quick energy 'fix', even if this energy is very short-lived and negatively impacts blood sugar/glucose, which drives poor brain health.

A nutrient-dense diet can support your physical and mental health during stressful times, but it's also important to remember that you need to find a way to reduce your feelings of stress, as they're driving the stress response.

By Delia McCabe, MA (Psych), PhD  
with Gary Kent