



# your health & well-being

## Dealing with Stress

### What happens when you are stressed?

When you are stressed, your body responds as though you are in danger. It makes hormones that speed up your heart and give you a burst of energy. This is called the fight-or-flight stress response.

Some stress is normal and useful. It can help if you need to work hard or react quickly. But if stress happens too often or lasts too long, it can cause headaches, an upset stomach, back pain, or trouble sleeping. It can make you moody, tense, or depressed. Your relationships may suffer, and you may not do well at work or school.

### Relieving stress

Some of the most useful stress management skills you can learn are healthy coping strategies. No one strategy is preferable—you need to find what works best for you.

### Relax your mind

- Write it down. Writing about stressful events and circumstances may help relieve your stress. One technique is to keep a stress journal. Use it to identify the sources of stress in your life so that you can find better ways to cope with them.
- Express your feelings. Discussing how you feel with friends, family members, or a counselor is an important way of coping with and relieving stress. Laughing and crying are also natural ways to release tension and frustration. They are part of a normal emotional healing process.
- Meditation focuses your attention on feeling calm and having a clear awareness about your life.
- Guided imagery (visualization) is a method of using your imagination to help you relax and release tension caused by stress. Your body responds to the images in your mind.
- Music therapy can relax your body, improve your mood, and change the pace of your day.
- Humor therapy is becoming widely accepted as a tool for reducing stress and boosting the body's immune system.

### Relax your body

- Physical activity. Regular, moderate physical activity may be the single best approach to managing stress. It can reduce stress and the stress response. Aerobic exercise that increases your heart rate (walking, running, bicycling, or swimming) helps to counteract the harmful effects of stress. Even vigorous everyday activities such as house cleaning or yard work can help. Stretching is also a good way to relieve muscle tension.
- Do something you enjoy. A meaningful activity helps relieve tension. This can be a hobby such as gardening or reading; a creative activity such as writing, crafts, or painting; or doing volunteer work for a cause that benefits others. Playing with pets also can help you relax. Making time to do something you like can help you relax.
- Massage, such as a shoulder and neck massage, can help. You can see a massage therapist, have a friend or family member give you a massage, or even give yourself a massage.
- Aromatherapy uses aroma-producing oils (essential oils) from plants to promote relaxation.
- Yoga, tai chi, and qi gong are forms of exercise and meditation. They generally require initial instruction. Books and videos are available to help you do them at home.

### Professional help

If you feel overwhelmed, you may want to seek help from a professional counselor or other health professional. They can help you find ways to reduce the symptoms and decrease the stress in your life.

#### A professional can provide:

- **Cognitive-behavioral therapy:** This teaches you to be aware of how you perceive stress, helps you understand how your perception influences your reaction to it, and teaches you how to develop and maintain skills to deal with stress.
- **Biofeedback:** A method of consciously controlling a body function such as skin temperature, muscle tension, heart rate, or blood pressure. Learning biofeedback requires several sessions in a biofeedback lab or other setting.
- **Hypnosis:** A hypnotherapist helps people accept suggestions that can help change their behavior. Look for a health professional such as a psychologist, counselor, or doctor with training and experience in hypnotherapy.

Sources: Healthwise®





### Chronic Stress

Long-term chronic stress can create serious problems. It is caused by irritating hassles over a period of time, or an ongoing, difficult situation. Conditions that may lead to chronic stress include:

- Health problems, if you have a chronic illness such as heart disease, diabetes or arthritis.
- Emotional problems, such as unexpressed or uncontrolled anger, depression, grief, guilt, or low self-esteem.

- Relationship problems, if you do not have someone to share your feelings with, are having difficulty in a relationship, or feel that you have few friends.
- Your job, if you are unhappy with your work, or your work is dangerous or too demanding.
- Life cycle transitions and developmental stages, such as becoming a teenager, leaving home, or getting married.
- A child, teen, or other family member who is under stress because of physical or emotional problems.

## december tip of the month

### Avoiding unnecessary stress

Because stress is unavoidable, it is important to find ways to reduce or prevent stressful incidents and decrease your negative reactions to stress. Where can you start?

- Managing time – remember to schedule time for yourself, and don't be afraid to delegate. Prioritize your time by rating tasks according to importance and urgency, and redirect your time to activities that are important and meaningful to you.
- Managing your commitments by not over- or under-committing. Don't commit to what is not important to you. Deal with procrastination by using a day planner, breaking large projects into smaller ones, and setting short-term deadlines.
- Build healthy coping strategies
- Balance personal, work, and family needs and obligations. Get enough sleep, because your body recovers from the stresses of the day while you are sleeping.
- Eat a balanced diet for a nutritional defense against stress, and get moderate exercise throughout the week.
- Have a social support system, turning to family members, friends, colleagues or a professional counselor to help reduce your stress level.

## On myCIGNA.com this month

### Coping with holiday stress

It's easy to have high expectations for the winter holidays, however we may celebrate them, and those expectations can be a real source of stress. Maybe it's the family visits, traveling at a busy time, the added expenses, or just coping with the burdens we put on ourselves to make everything perfect. How can you deal with the season better?

The **Strength and Resilience online coaching program** is a great resource from CIGNA. It focuses on keeping work and life in better balance, decreasing stress levels and improving coping skills. Just log in to [www.myCIGNA.com](http://www.myCIGNA.com) and go to the myHealth tab to register and get started.

