“Stress Management: Implications for Health and Well-Being”

Stress….we have all experienced it at some point in our lives. Sometimes stress can be a positive force, providing motivation to perform well at a job interview or on a test. Unfortunately it is often a negative force. Chronic stress, experienced over a prolonged period of time, can affect your health and well-being.

Why does this occur? Well, your body is hard-wired to react to stress in ways meant to protect you against threats from predators or other aggressors. These days, you're not likely to face the threat of being eaten. But you probably do confront many challenges every day, such as meeting deadlines, paying bills and juggling childcare that make your body react in the same way. As a result, your body's natural alarm system — the “fight or flight” response — may be stuck in the “on” position.
Understanding the natural stress response

Have you ever found yourself with sweaty hands on a first date or felt your heart pound during a scary movie? Then you know you can feel stress in both your mind and body.

When you encounter a perceived threat — a car runs a stoplight and speeds toward you — your hypothalamus, a tiny region at the base of your brain, sets off an alarm system in your body. Through a combination of nerve and hormonal signals, this system prompts your adrenal glands, to release a surge of hormones, including adrenaline and cortisol.

Adrenaline increases your heart rate, elevates your blood pressure and boosts energy supplies. Cortisol, the primary stress hormone, increases sugars (glucose) in the bloodstream, enhances your brain's use of glucose and increases the availability of substances that repair tissues (in case of injury).

Cortisol also curbs functions that would be nonessential or detrimental in a fight-or-flight situation. It alters immune system responses and suppresses the digestive system, the reproductive system and growth processes. This complex natural alarm system also communicates with regions of your brain that control mood, motivation and fear.

Chronic stress

The body's stress-response system is usually self-limiting. That is, once a perceived threat has passed, hormone levels return to normal. As adrenaline and cortisol levels drop, your heart rate and blood pressure return to baseline levels, and other systems resume their regular activities.

But what happens when you have repeated stressors or stressors that don’t really end? The long-term activation of the stress-response system — and the subsequent overexposure to cortisol and other stress hormones — can disrupt almost all your body's processes. This puts you at increased risk for a number of health problems, including:

- Anxiety or Depression
- Digestive problems
- Heart disease
• Diabetes
• Sleep problems
• Weight gain
• Memory and concentration impairment

Job strain — high demands coupled with low control — is associated with increased risk of coronary disease. Other forms of chronic stress, such as depression and low levels of social support, have also been implicated in increased cardiovascular risk. And once you're sick, stress can also make it harder to recover. Chronic stress may cause disease because of the overeating, smoking and other bad habits people use to cope with stress. That's why it's so important to learn healthy ways to cope with the stressors in your life.

**Learning to react to and manage life stressors in a healthy way**

Stressful events are a fact of life. And you may not be able to change your current situation. But you can take steps to manage the impact these events have on you. You can learn to identify what stresses you and how to take care of yourself physically and emotionally.

Stress management strategies include:

- **Identify what is causing your stress.** If you feel stressed, write down the cause, your thoughts and your mood. Once you know what's bothering you, develop a plan for addressing it. Often that means setting more reasonable expectations for yourself and others or asking for help with household responsibilities, job assignments or other tasks. List all your commitments, assess your priorities and then eliminate any tasks that are not absolutely essential.

- **Build strong relationships.** Relationships can be a source of stress. Research has found that negative, hostile reactions with your spouse cause immediate changes in stress-sensitive hormones, for example. But relationships can also serve as stress buffers. Reach out to family members or close friends and let them know you're having a tough time. They may be able to offer practical assistance and support, useful ideas or just a fresh perspective as you begin to tackle whatever's causing your stress.
• **Take a deep breath.** Before you react, take time to regroup—using the old adage “count to 10.” Then reconsider.

• **Exercise.** Because your body is gearing up to “fight or flee,” walking or other physical activities can help you decrease the physiological arousal created by our stress response. Plus, exercise increases the production of endorphins, your body's natural mood-booster. Commit to a daily walk or other form of exercise — a small step that can make a big difference in reducing stress levels.

• **Rest your mind.** According to recent research, stress keeps more than 40 percent of adults lying awake at night. To help ensure you get the recommended seven or eight hours of shut-eye, cut back on caffeine, remove distractions such as television or computers from your bedroom and go to bed at the same time each night.

• **Practice Relaxation techniques or learn to meditate.** Research shows that activities like yoga and relaxation exercises not only help reduce stress, but also boost immune functioning.

• **Get help.** If you continue to feel overwhelmed, consult with a psychologist or other licensed mental health professional who can help you learn how to manage stress effectively. He or she can help you identify situations or behaviors that contribute to your chronic stress and then develop an action plan for changing them.

The payoff for learning to manage stress is peace of mind and — perhaps — a longer, healthier life.

This is based on information from the American Psychological Association and Mayo Clinic.