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Effects of Chronic Stress

Chronic stress refers to prolonged periods of mental stress, which can have lasting effects on the entire body. People who report higher levels of chronic stress are more likely to develop heart disease, depression, diabetes, dementia, cancer, digestive symptoms, and more. The following diagram shows potential harmful changes in the body as a result of chronic stress.

Brain & Nervous System:

- Activates "fight or flight" response
- Damages areas of the brain responsible for memory and learning
- Increases risk of Alzheimer's and other dementia

Heart & Blood Vessels:

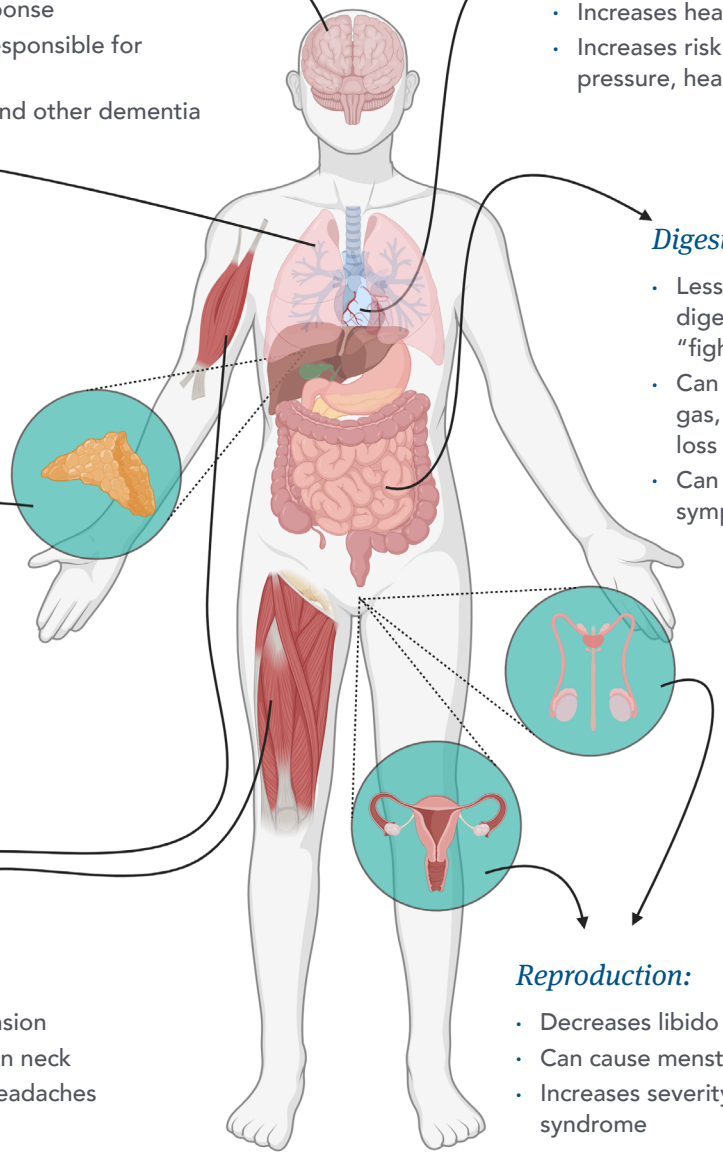
- Increases heart rate
- Increases risk of high blood pressure, heart disease, and stroke

Respiratory System:

- Causes shortness of breath
- Worsens asthma and chronic obstructive lung disease
- Can cause shallow breathing, which over time may decrease oxygen to vital organs

Digestion:

- Less blood flow to digestive organs due to "fight or flight" response
- Can trigger digestive pain, gas, bloating, nausea, and loss of appetite
- Can flare irritable bowel symptoms



Adrenal Glands:

- Release more cortisol (a stress hormone)
- Long-term elevations of cortisol can increase the risk of other health conditions

Musculoskeletal:

- Causes muscle tension
- Increases tension in neck
- Increases risk of headaches and migraines

Reproduction:

- Decreases libido and fertility
- Can cause menstrual irregularities
- Increases severity of premenstrual syndrome

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Common Chronic Stressors

- Information overload from social media and news
- Relationship conflicts
- Expectations to multitask at work and home
- Social isolation
- Finances
- Managing chronic illness
- Traumatic events (e.g., death of a loved one, COVID-19)

Tips for Reducing Chronic Stress

Day-to-day stress is unavoidable, but it does not have to turn into chronic stress that negatively impacts your health. There are many ways to manage stress – from daily activities like deep breathing to longer-term strategies like counseling. Finding a variety of techniques that work for you will help you build resilience and support your overall wellbeing for years to come. Here are some more ideas to help you manage stress:

- Take deep breaths as outlined in IFM's **Breathing Techniques to Soothe the Soul**
- Get at least 7 to 9 hours of quality sleep each night
- Exercise, but not too much
- Talk to a counselor or ask your functional medicine practitioner for a referral
- Start a gratitude journal
- Meditate
- Optimize your nutrition to support a healthy stress response (healthy protein and fats; a variety of colorful vegetables and fruits)
- Socialize with supportive friends or family
- Take a Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) course
- Create and reassess your "to-do" list; handoff things that others can help with
- Spend time in nature
- Do a digital detox (e.g., no electronic devices for 24 hours or a weekend)
- Reframe your self-talk (e.g., instead of, "They rejected my job application," think, "I wasn't rejected. I'm being redirected toward something better.")

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