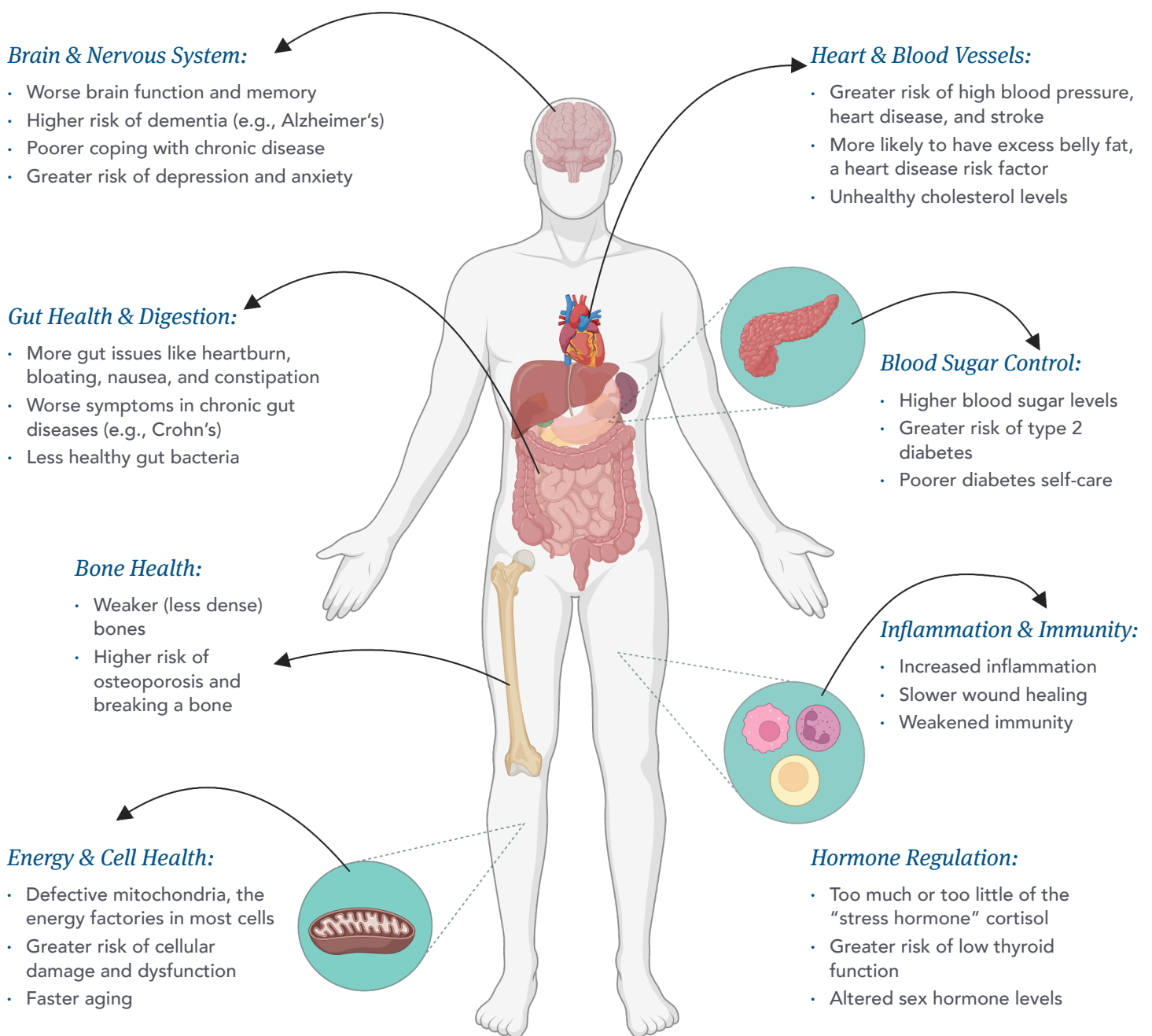


Importance of Social Support & Relationships

Social interaction and good relationships can help you feel well and live a healthy life. When these key contributors to health are lacking, the risk of disease increases. The following diagram shows some of the health effects linked with poor social support, isolation, and loneliness.





Pets can be an excellent source of support. One study found that walking a dog decreased feelings of loneliness. Another study showed that petting an animal for 10 minutes lowered the stress hormone cortisol. Studies also suggest spending time with a pet can improve blood pressure and heart rate.

Tips to Increase Your Support Network

Building and keeping a good social support network may take a little more effort during certain times of your life, such as when you move to a new town or retire. Here are some strategies you can use to expand your network of close friends, casual acquaintances, and mentors:

- **Cultivate a variety of relationship types.** This could include both local and long-distance friends. For example, perhaps there is someone in your local area who supports the same sports team, while a long-distance friend shares a common interest or hobby with you. Each person can provide a different aspect of support in your life.
- **Plan social interaction.** Schedule virtual or phone dates with long-distance friends, or set up walks with local friends.
- **Volunteer.** For example, consider volunteering at a charity, food bank, animal shelter, or religious organization.
- **Join a book club or meetup group.** Many areas have a wide variety of interest groups, including activity groups like outdoor or mall walking. There are also many online group options, such as those learning a new language.
- **Take a class.** Select one focused on something you'd like to learn more about. For example, cooking or crafts classes are a great way to interact with new people and learn new skills.
- **Sign up for a trip.** A bus tour or other trip organized for a group could be a fun way to meet others if you enjoy travel.
- **Help your neighbors.** Offering to lend a helping hand is a great way to start building a friendship with your neighbors. For example, let them know you can water their garden or put out their trash bins when they travel.
- **Take care of a pet.** Pet your cat or walk your dog. If you don't have a pet, consider volunteering to walk a neighbor's dog or adopt a pet.

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