



American Heart Association®

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## Stress and Heart Health



When you've got an unexpected bill, a dead car battery or family trouble on your hands, are you like a cartoon character with steam shooting out of your ears? Or a cool cat who manages your stress?

Everyone feels stress in different ways and reacts to it in different ways.

How much stress you experience and how you react to it can lead to a wide variety of health problems — and that's why it's critical to know what you can do about it.

### Stress and Your Heart

More research is needed to determine how stress contributes to heart disease — the leading killer of Americans. But stress may affect behaviors and factors that increase heart disease risk: high blood pressure and cholesterol levels, smoking, physical inactivity and overeating. Some people may choose to drink too much alcohol or smoke cigarettes to "manage" their chronic stress, however these habits can increase blood pressure and may damage artery walls.

And your body's response to stress may be a headache, back strain, or stomach pains. Stress can also zap your energy, wreak havoc on your sleep and make you feel cranky, forgetful and out of control.

A stressful situation sets off a chain of events. Your body releases adrenaline, a hormone that temporarily causes your breathing and heart rate to speed up and your blood pressure to rise. These reactions prepare you to deal with the situation — the "fight or flight" response.

When stress is constant, your body remains in high gear off and on for days or weeks at a time. Although the link between stress and heart disease isn't clear, chronic stress may cause some people to drink too much alcohol which can increase your blood pressure and may damage the artery walls.



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## What can you do about stress?

Exercising, maintaining a positive attitude, not smoking, not drinking too much coffee, enjoying a healthy diet and maintaining a healthy weight are good ways to deal with stress.

Medicines are helpful for many things, but usually not for stress. Some people take tranquilizers to calm them down immediately, but it's far better in the long term to learn to manage your stress through relaxation or stress management techniques. Be careful not to confuse stress with anxiety. If you suffer from anxiety, speak with your doctor a treatment or management plan including whether you need medication. Figuring out how stress pushes your buttons is an important step in dealing with it.

When you're under stress, do you:

- eat to calm down?
- speak and eat very fast?
- drink alcohol or smoke?
- rush around but do not get much done?
- work too much?
- procrastinate?
- sleep too little, too much or both?
- slow down?
- try to do too many things at once?

Engaging in even one of these behaviors may mean that you are not dealing with stress as well as you could.

If your stress is nonstop, stress management classes can also help. Look for them at community colleges, rehab programs, in hospitals or by calling a therapist in your community.

Empower yourself by taking actions to control your stress level. Set goals that are reasonable to achieve.



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## Commit to the actions you will take, starting this week.

I will practice using positive self talk at least once a day.

Yes | No | Maybe

I will remember to use emergency stress stoppers when I face stressful situations.

Yes | No | Maybe

I will spend at least 15 minutes every day finding pleasure in something that I enjoy.

Yes | No | Maybe

I will practice daily relaxation, such as deep breathing or another relaxation technique.

Yes | No | Maybe

I will add one healthy habit to my life this week. The habit is: \_\_\_\_\_.

Yes | No | Maybe

How many "Yes" answers do you have?

3 or more That's terrific! Take a week or two to get used to these habits, then think of more healthy habits you can practice to manage stress.

1 or 2 Good! Work on these habits for a week, then take the quiz again.

Maybe you will be able to add another "Yes" answer.

0 Don't worry. Work toward one of these goals or you can create your own goal. Think of stress management techniques that work for you and practice them as often as needed.