



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.

Can managing stress reduce or prevent heart disease?

[Managing stress](#) is a good idea for your overall health, and researchers are currently studying whether managing stress is effective for heart disease. A few studies have examined how well treatment or therapies work in reducing the effects of stress on cardiovascular disease. Studies using psychosocial therapies – involving both psychological and social aspects – are promising in the prevention of second heart attacks. After a [heart attack](#) or [stroke](#), people who feel depressed, anxious or overwhelmed by stress should [talk to their doctor](#) or other healthcare professionals.

What can you do about stress?

When you are under stress, do any of these behaviors apply to you?

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