

STRESS AND YOUR KIDNEYS

What is stress?

Stress is anything that can upset or disturb your equilibrium or balance. Stress can be physiological (infection, injury, disease), or psychological (anxiety, argument, conflict, threats to personal safety or well-being). Living with a chronic illness, such as kidney disease, or learning for the first time that you have a chronic illness can be a significant source of stress.

Psychological stress is something that we contend with every day. It can be a result of positive life events, such as marriage and children, or it can come from more emotionally challenging events, such as the loss of a loved one, divorce and personal or financial problems.

Stress is normal, and your physical response to stress, including faster breathing and heart rate, a spike in blood pressure, dilated pupils, tense muscles, is a natural and normal process. The levels of fats and sugars in your blood can also increase. The body's response to stress is commonly known as "fight or flight." Although it is a natural process to help us survive immediate dangers, these reactions from too much or constant stress can eventually take their toll on your health.

How can stress impact my health and kidneys?

Not only does your body's reaction to stress help you with immediate dangers or crises, it can also serve as a positive motivator while handling life's challenges—when channeled properly. However, when your body is under high levels of stress for sustained periods of time, these physical reactions, if left unchecked, can eventually harm your health. The combined impacts of increased blood pressure, faster heart rate, and higher fats and sugar in your blood can contribute to a number of health problems, including high blood pressure, diabetes, and heart disease (also known as cardiovascular disease).

Stress and uncontrolled reactions to stress can also lead to kidney damage. As the blood filtering units of your body, your kidneys can be prone to circulation problems. High blood pressure and high blood sugar can place an additional strain or burden on your kidneys. If you already have heart disease, diabetes, or kidney disease, then the body's reactions to stress can become more and more dangerous. Therefore, managing stress is an important part of maintaining your overall health. Just as uncontrolled reactions to stress can raise blood pressure and heart rate, managing your reaction to the stress can lower blood pressure and heart rate. What can I do to manage my stress?

It is very difficult, if not impossible, to completely get rid of stress, or to never have any physical reactions to stress. However, there are steps you can take to manage stress and help control your body's response to stress. Some simple ways to reduce stress include:

- Eat healthier foods
- Limit salt and caffeine (especially if you have high blood pressure)
- Limit sugar (especially if you have diabetes), and fats (especially if you are at risk for heart and blood vessel disease)
- Set aside time to relax
- Practice yoga or take up meditation
- Don't ignore your feeling or keep them bottled up inside
- Find a prayer group
- Talk to a friend, loved one, spiritual leader, or healthcare professional
- Journal
- Set realistic goals and expectations and give yourself a pat on the back for every small step forward
- Get enough sleep and maintain a regular sleep schedule
- Maintain a positive attitude and outlook
- Take a vacation
- Regular exercise and more physical activity
- Spend time outdoors in nature
- Laugh
- Dance
- Drink chamomile tea
- Try aromatherapy with lavender oil
- Listen to soothing music
- Breathe deeply and take the time to exhale
- Turn off the news particularly at night right before going to bed. In fact, get that TV out of your bedroom
- Limit your computer time to give your eyes a rest
- Don't dwell on the past or obsess about the future
- Let things go
- Forgive and forget
- When the situation gets particularly bad, just remember, this too shall pass... This list does not include all of the ways you can manage stress. Improvements in diet and more physical activity are things everyone should attempt. Talk to a healthcare professional to discuss which dietary and lifestyle changes might be best for you. Other methods to manage stress will depend on your personal preferences. You might prefer music, while someone else prefers a relaxation technique or massage. No matter the technique, managing your stress can help you feel better and live a healthier life.