

14 Physical Signs Your Stress Is Out Of Control

Stress doesn't just dominate your mind—it makes its mark on your entire body.

Everyone gets stressed. Whether it's from financial troubles, relationships, health problems, or work, there's pretty much an endless list of things that can rile you up and leave you feeling frazzled. For some people, though, the consequences of stress can show up more outwardly than it does in others.

"Stress does not have to be either very high or necessarily chronic to feel it fairly immediately," Julie Pike, Ph.D., says. By feel it, she means not just in the form of anxiety, overthinking, and worrying. Stress is the body's response to the mind's perception that the environment is too demanding. So naturally, this response shows up in many ways throughout your body—for some, it hits harder than others.

Stress activates your sympathetic nervous system. It tells our body it's in the presence of a predator, so we have to be on guard and either need to run or fight, which is why we get so nervous and so snappy. This fight or flight response sends our bodies signals, which cause countless effects, thanks to the rush of hormones and brain chemicals involved.

Here are 14 of the most common physical signs your stress levels are too high.

1. Neck pain

Muscle tension is one of the first physical manifestations of stress, and it tends to be most pronounced at the base of the head. That's why your masseuse may ask if you've been stressed lately when your neck and shoulders feel insanely tense.

2. Headaches

Stress is the most common cause of tension headaches, according to the Mayo Clinic. It can also trigger other types of headaches, like migraines, or make an existing headache worse.

Many studies have found that stress can contribute to headaches, a condition characterized by pain in the head or neck region. One study of 267 people with chronic headaches found that a stressful event preceded the development of chronic headaches in about 45% of cases. A larger study showed that increased stress intensity was associated with an increase in the number of headache days experienced per month. Another study surveyed 150 military service members at a headache clinic, finding that 67% reported their headaches were triggered by stress, making it the second most common headache trigger.

3. Nausea

Whether a knot in your stomach or straight up nausea, stress can have a wide range of GI consequences. That's because digestion is often disrupted and slowed down when your nervous system is trying to cope with stress. Irritable bowel syndrome can also be linked to stress—the colon is partially controlled by the nervous system, and those with IBS tend to have colons that are more reactive to stress, according to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America.

4. Hair loss

Hair loss is more likely to be the product of really long sustained periods of high levels of stress. Typically one isolated stressful situation isn't going to make your hair start falling out. But experiencing a life-altering event, like a death of a loved one or a huge career change, can actually cause your hair to stop growing temporarily as your body dedicates its efforts to surviving said event. When it starts growing again, the hairs that were stalled in the middle of growing get shed all at once, so you may find yourself combing out what seems like handfuls at a time.

5. Weight gain

High stress means high levels of cortisol coursing through our veins. Cortisol is a stress hormone that not only prompts you to eat, but also causes you to retain calories because it thinks you're in an emergency situation.

6. Acne

Cortisol surges can also lead to cystic acne—aka, red, painful zits that won't go away no matter how much benzoyl peroxide you slather on.

Acne is one of the most visible ways that stress often manifests itself.

When some people are feeling stressed out, they tend to touch their faces more often. This can spread bacteria and contribute to the development of acne.

Several studies have also confirmed that acne may be associated with higher levels of stress. One study measured acne severity in 22 people before and during an exam. Increased levels of stress as a result of the exam were associated with greater acne severity. Another study of 94 teenagers found that higher stress levels were associated with worse acne, especially in boys.

7. Rapid heartbeat and chest pain

When we're stressed, our bodies release cortisol plus other stress hormones—adrenaline and noradrenaline—to get us ready to fight. This causes a short-term increase in heart rate and blood pressure and even chest pain. Over time, stress really can take its toll on your heart. Chronic stress leads to cardiovascular disease. Though the connection isn't crystal clear, the American Heart Association suggests that stress can cause high blood pressure and cholesterol levels, plus encourage other habits that are linked to heart disease like smoking, physical inactivity, and overeating.

8. Insomnia

When you're feeling super worried and having a tough time shutting down your mind, chances are you'll also have some issues falling asleep at night.

9. Getting sick more often

Research shows that stress affects the immune system and makes us more prone to getting sick. A meta-analysis done in 2004 of 300 studies found that while a few minutes of stress may actually boost immunity in one way, stress with any significant duration, like what we actually experience, has a negative impact on immunity. People who are older or already sick are more prone to decreased immunity from stress.

If you feel like you're constantly battling a case of the sniffles, stress may be to blame.

Stress may take a toll on your immune system and can cause increased susceptibility to infections. In one study, 61 older adults were injected with the flu vaccine. Those with chronic stress were found to have a weakened immune response to the vaccine, indicating that stress may be associated with decreased immunity. In another study, 235 adults were categorized into

either a high- or low-stress group. Over a six-month period, those in the high-stress group experienced 70% more respiratory infections and had nearly 61% more days of symptoms than the low-stress group.

10. Irregular period

Too much cortisol can interfere with the sex hormones that regulate ovulation and make your period irregular. Extreme stress may stop your body from releasing an egg, which means you won't get your monthly period. This shouldn't happen under normal levels of stress, though—this is typically only seen in instances of very heavy, chronic stress.

11. Fatigue

If you're not sleeping well, you're probably walking around all day exhausted. Plus, when your body feels overwhelmed and is working overtime to handle the stressors it registers, it takes a lot out of you. When you're tired, you get more irritable and it's harder to cope mentally with stress, creating a vicious cycle. Tried and true stress relievers like exercise, meditation, taking some time for yourself, and even massage or acupuncture, can help relieve tension and calm your mind and body.

12. Chronic Pain

Aches and pains are a common complaint that can result from increased levels of stress.

One study made up of 37 teenagers with sickle cell disease found that higher levels of daily stress were associated with increases in same-day pain levels. Other studies have shown that increased levels of the stress hormone cortisol may be associated with chronic pain. For example, one study compared 16 people with chronic back pain to a control group. It found that those with chronic pain had higher levels of cortisol. Another study showed that people with chronic pain had higher levels of cortisol in their hair, an indicator of prolonged stress.

13. Changes in Libido

Many people experience changes in their sex drives during stressful periods.

One small study evaluated the stress levels of 30 women and then measured their arousal while watching an erotic film. Those with high levels of chronic stress experienced less arousal compared to those with lower stress levels. Another study made up of 103 women found that higher levels of stress were associated with lower levels of sexual activity and satisfaction. Similarly, one study looked at 339 medical residents. It reported that high levels of stress negatively impacted sexual desire, arousal and satisfaction.

13. Appetite Changes

Changes in appetite are common during times of stress. When you feel stressed out, you may find yourself either with no appetite at all or ravenously raiding the refrigerator in the middle of the night. One study of college students found that 81% reported that they experienced changes in appetite when they were stressed out. Of these, 62% had an increase in appetite, while 38% experienced a decrease. In a study of 129 people, exposure to stress was associated with behaviors like eating without being hungry.

14. Depression

Some studies suggest that chronic stress may contribute to the development of depression. One study of 816 women with major depression found that the onset of depression was significantly associated with both acute and chronic stress. Another study found that high levels of stress were associated with higher levels of depressive symptoms in 240 adolescents. In addition, a study of 38 people with non-chronic major depression found that stressful life events were significantly associated with depressive episodes.