WellPATH
Your Path to Better Health
Joint Health Management Board

Monthly WellPATH Spotlight

December 2017: Stress Management

What is Stress?

Stress is how the brain and body respond to any demand. Every type of demand or stressor—such as exercise, work, school, major life changes, traumatic events, and even the holidays—can be stressful. Stress can affect your health. It is important to pay attention to how you deal with minor and major stress events so that you know when to seek help. Review the spotlight to learn more about stress management and complete the monthly quiz for a chance to win a $25 gift card.

According to the National Institute of Health, there are five things everyone should know about stress:

1. Stress Affects Everyone

Everyone feels stressed from time to time. Some people may cope with stress more effectively or recover from stressful events more quickly than others. There are different types of stress—all of which carry physical and mental health risks. A stressor may be a one time or short-term occurrence, or it can be an occurrence that keeps happening over a long period of time. Examples of stress include:

- Routine stress related to the pressures of work, school, family and other daily responsibilities.
- Stress brought about by a sudden negative change, such as losing a job, divorce, or illness.
- Traumatic stress experienced in an event like a major accident, war, assault, or a natural disaster where people may be in danger of being seriously hurt or killed. People who experience traumatic stress often experience temporary symptoms of mental illness, but most recover naturally soon after.

2. Not All Stress is Bad

Stress can motivate people to prepare or perform, like when they need to take a test or interview for a new job. Stress can even be life-saving in some situations. In response to danger, your body prepares to face a threat or flee to safety. In these situations, your pulse quickens, you breathe faster, your muscles tense, your brain uses more oxygen and increases activity—all functions aimed at survival.

3. Long Term Stress Can Harm Your Body

Health problems can occur if the stress response goes on for too long or becomes chronic, such as when the source of stress is constant, or if the response continues after

Source: National Institute of Health
www.nimh.nih.gov

the danger has subsided. With chronic stress, those same life-saving responses in your body can suppress immune, digestive, sleep, and reproductive systems, which may cause them to stop working normally.

Different people may feel stress in different ways. For example, some people experience mainly digestive symptoms, while others may have headaches, sleeplessness, sadness, anger or irritability. People under chronic stress are prone to more frequent and severe viral infections, such as the flu or common cold.

Routine stress may be the hardest type of stress to notice at first. Because the source of stress tends to be more constant than in cases of acute or traumatic stress, the body gets no clear signal to return to normal functioning. Over time, continued strain on your body from routine stress may contribute to serious health problems, such as heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, and other illnesses, as well as mental disorders like depression or anxiety.

Stress Warning Signs and Symptoms	
Cognitive Symptoms	**Emotional Symptoms**
■ Memory problems ■ Inability to concentrate ■ Poor judgment ■ Seeing only the negative ■ Anxious or racing thoughts ■ Constant worrying	■ Moodiness ■ Irritability or short temper ■ Agitation, inability to relax ■ Feeling overwhelmed ■ Sense of loneliness and isolation ■ Depression or general unhappiness
Physical Symptoms	**Behavioral Symptoms**
■ Aches and pains ■ Diarrhea or constipation ■ Nausea, dizziness ■ Chest pain, rapid heartbeat ■ Loss of sex drive ■ Frequent colds	■ Eating more or less ■ Sleeping too much or too little ■ Isolating yourself from others ■ Procrastinating or neglecting responsibilities ■ Using alcohol, cigarettes, or drugs to relax ■ Nervous habits (e.g. nail biting, pacing)

4. There Are Ways to Manage Stress

The effects of stress tend to build up over time. Taking practical steps to manage your stress can reduce or prevent these effects. The following are some tips that may help you to cope with stress:

- **Recognize the Signs** of your body's response to stress, such as difficulty sleeping, increased alcohol and other substance use, being easily angered, feeling depressed, and having low energy.
- **Talk to Your Doctor or Health Care Provider**. Get proper health care for existing or new health problems.
- **Get Regular Exercise**. Just 30 minutes per day of walking can help boost your mood and reduce stress.
- **Try a Relaxing Activity**. Explore stress coping programs, which may incorporate meditation, yoga, tai chi, or other gentle exercises. For some stress-related conditions, these approaches are used in addition to other forms of treatment. Schedule regular times for these and other healthy and relaxing activities.

Source: National Institute of Health
www.nimh.nih.gov

- **Set Goals and Priorities**. Decide what must get done and what can wait, and learn to say no to new tasks if they are putting you into overload. Note what you have accomplished at the end of the day, not what you have been unable to do.
- **Stay Connected** with people who can provide emotional and other support. To reduce stress, ask for help from friends, family, and community or religious organizations.

5. If You're Overwhelmed by Stress, Ask for Help from a Health Professional

You should seek help right away if you have suicidal thoughts, are overwhelmed, feel you cannot cope, or are using drugs or alcohol to cope. Your doctor may be able to provide a recommendation. You can find resources to help you find a mental health provider by visiting www.nimh.nih.gov/findhelp.

Call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: Anyone experiencing severe or long-term, unrelenting stress can become overwhelmed. If you or a loved one is having thoughts of suicide, call the toll-free National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org) at 1-800-273-TALK (8255), available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The service is available to anyone. All calls are confidential.

Source: National Institute of Health
www.nimh.nih.gov