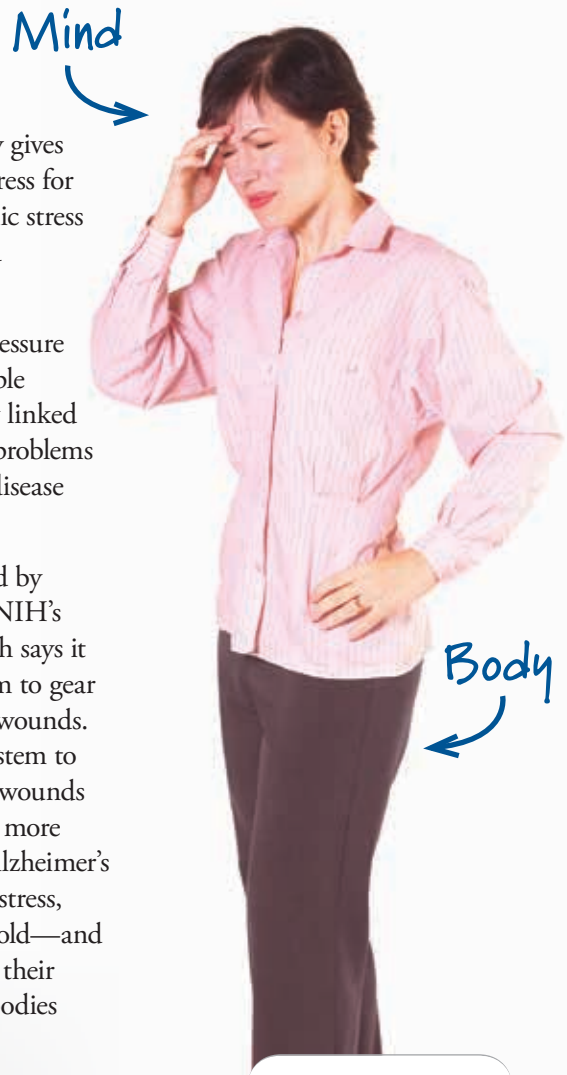
WELCOA
ONLINE BULLETINS

To Your HEALTH

WELCOA'S ONLINE GENERAL WELLNESS BULLETIN

Stressed Out?

It Affects Your...



Maybe it's money trouble or the burden of caring for a sick relative. Maybe it's your job. Maybe it's the traffic. Whatever the cause, everyone seems stressed out these days. People once hotly debated the idea that stress can affect your body, but we now know that stress can cause both short- and long-term changes to your body and mind. The more we understand how stress affects us, the more we learn about how to cope better.

The Effects of Short-Term Stress

Long before we learned how to drive cars to work and check in with the office on handheld computers, our bodies evolved to be finely attuned to a predator's attack. When we sense danger, our bodies quickly release hormones like adrenaline into our bloodstream that increase our heart rate, focus our attention and cause other changes to quickly prepare us for coming danger. Stress was—and still is—crucial to our survival.

The Effects of Long-Term Stress

The stress that we're adapted to deal with, however, is the short, intense kind—like running away before a bear can make a lunch of us. Modern life frequently gives us little time between periods of stress for our body to recuperate. This chronic stress eventually takes both a mental and physical toll.

It's long been known that blood pressure and cholesterol levels go up in people who are stressed. Studies have now linked chronic stress with cardiovascular problems like hypertension, coronary heart disease and stroke.

The immune system is also affected by stress. Dr. Esther M. Sternberg at NIH's National Institute of Mental Health says it makes sense for the immune system to gear up and get ready to heal potential wounds. But chronic stress can cause the system to backfire. Research has shown that wounds in people under chronic stress heal more slowly. Caregivers of people with Alzheimer's disease, who are often under great stress, are more likely to get the flu or a cold—and when they take vaccines to protect their loved ones from getting flu, their bodies don't respond as well.

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

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(Continued from previous page)

Certain hormones that are released when you're stressed out, such as cortisol and catecholamines, have been tied to these long-term effects of stress. Sternberg says, "If you're pumping out a lot of cortisol and your immune cells are bathed in high levels of stress hormones, they're going to be tuned down."

Stress & You: A Long-Term Relationship You Don't Want

Two things that affect how much stress people feel are self-esteem and a sense of control. Workers who feel more in control at their jobs tend to feel less stress. People with low self-esteem produce more cortisol when they're asked to do something that's not easy for them, like speak in front of other people. They also don't become accustomed to the stress even after doing something several times and continue to produce high levels of cortisol.

It's not easy to change things like self-esteem and your sense of control at work, but there are things you can do to help you cope with the stresses of modern life.

Coping with Chronic Stress

People who are stressed out tend to do other things that make their body less healthy and more vulnerable to the effects of stress. Many eat more fatty comfort foods, which can lead to obesity and diabetes. They may smoke or drink more, raising the risk for cancer and other diseases. And they often feel they're just too busy to exercise.

Being physically active helps keep the body's systems in better shape and thus better able to deal with any demands from other stressful conditions.

Another factor affecting how we deal with stress is the isolation of modern life. It's important to develop a network of people you can go to and talk with when you're confronted with difficulties in your life.

Indeed, large studies have clearly shown that people who have more social relationships, a larger network of people they interact with on a regular basis, live longer. Research suggests they're less likely to show declines as they're older.

All this research highlights the fact that healthy practices can complement mainstream medicine to help treat and prevent disease. So, do things that make you feel good about yourself, mentally and physically. Get enough sleep. Eat a healthy diet and exercise regularly. Develop a network of people you can turn to in difficult times.

If you still find yourself too stressed out, talk to your health care professional. There are many therapies they may recommend to help you deal with stress and its consequences. The effects of being chronically stressed are too serious to simply accept as a fact of modern life.

Ways of Reducing Stress

- ✓ Get enough sleep.
- ✓ Exercise and control your diet.
- ✓ Build a social support network.
- ✓ Create peaceful times in your day.
- ✓ Try different relaxation methods until you find one that works for you.
- ✓ Don't smoke.
- ✓ Don't drink too much or abuse any other substances.

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BetterSafe!

WELCOA'S ONLINE BULLETIN FOR YOUR FAMILY'S SAFETY

Frightened Of Food

Living With Food Allergies

Imagine what life would be like if you had to constantly check out the ingredients in your favorite foods to make sure your life wasn't in danger after eating even a tiny bit. For some people with severe food allergies, that's become their way of life.

Food allergies cause about 30,000 severe allergic reactions and 150 deaths every year in the United States. They affect nearly 4% of adults and about 7% of children under 4 years old. Several studies show that food allergies are becoming more common.

How do You Become Allergic to Foods?

Food allergies occur if your immune system has an abnormal reaction to food. Normally, your immune system protects you from germs and disease by fighting off the harmful organisms that can make you sick. When your immune system makes a mistake and attacks a harmless substance you eat, it can cause serious, even life-threatening, allergic symptoms.

Food allergies can also cause a sudden and severe allergic reaction called anaphylaxis. Anaphylaxis brings life-threatening symptoms, which can include difficulty breathing, a drop in blood pressure and narrowing of the airways and wheezing (a whistling sound when you breathe).

Foods that can cause allergies include fish and shellfish such as shrimp, crayfish, lobster and crab; eggs, milk, peanuts, and tree nuts such as walnuts. Peanut and tree nut allergies are the leading causes of anaphylaxis.

Are Food Allergies Hereditary?

Research shows that you're more likely to develop food allergies if several members of your family have allergies. That includes any type of allergy, including hay fever. If you

Symptoms of a food allergy can include:

- Coughing
- Tingling in the mouth
- Skin reactions like hives and itching
- Nausea, vomiting, stomach pain or diarrhea

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

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(Continued from previous page)

have 2 allergic parents, you're more likely to develop food allergy than someone with 1 allergic parent.

Some children are actually born allergic to certain foods, whereas others develop food allergies over time. Children are more likely than adults to outgrow allergies to milk, eggs or soy as their digestive tracts mature and their immune systems develop. They don't, however, outgrow allergies to peanuts. But scientists are testing whether individuals might be gradually desensitized to peanuts so that eventually they would not suffer an allergic reaction to them.

Living with Food Allergies

If you have an allergic reaction to a certain food, you may also be allergic to similar foods. This is called cross-reactivity. For example, if you're allergic to shrimp, allergy testing may show that you're also allergic to other seafood.

Treating Food Allergies

The only cure for a food allergy is to avoid that particular food. So if you have any unpleasant reaction to food, see your doctor to find out what's causing the problem. Although many people have bad reactions to certain foods, it may not always be allergy.

To help your physician diagnose and treat you, try to keep a daily diet diary that lists the foods you ate and when you ate them, along with the symptoms you had and when they surfaced.

If you have a food allergy, it's best to prepare for an emergency in case you eat the wrong food by accident. Since allergic reactions to food can be hazardous, experts recommend that people be very cautious. Call 911 if you or someone you know seems to be having an allergic reaction to food.

Physicians usually prescribe an auto-injector device that has epinephrine (adrenaline) for allergy sufferers. Ask your doctor if you need to carry one and learn how to give that shot to yourself if needed.

Dangerous Food Allergy Symptoms

A sudden and severe allergic reaction is called anaphylaxis. Watch out for these life-threatening symptoms and call for help if you see or feel them:

- Difficulty breathing
- Drop in blood pressure
- Rapid heartbeat
- Swollen tongue, throat and other parts of the body
- Narrowing of the airways and wheezing (a whistling sound when you breathe)
- Fainting

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DAY IN DAY OUT
WELCOA'S ONLINE BULLETIN FOR YOUR LIFESTYLE

Can Coffee Be Good For You?

The Buzz On Your Morning Java

Because it tastes so good, you may assume coffee is bad for you. Maybe you've heard rumors that your morning brew causes everything from heart disease to cancer. But researchers are finding that coffee poses little to no health risk for most people. Not only that, coffee drinking might have some health benefits.

The Possible Health Benefits of Coffee

Some evidence even suggests that coffee may help reduce the risk of liver cancer. The NIH's National Cancer Institute is now organizing a new effort to put together data from many studies and look into this question, among many others.

Coffee & Parkinson's

Some studies have linked coffee intake with a lower risk of developing Parkinson's disease. "When looking at Parkinson's disease patients, they may be up to 4-8 times less likely to have been heavy coffee drinkers," says Dr. Wendy R. Galpern of NIH's National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke. However, she points out, the studies in this area have been limited. "It's hard to know if this is just an association or if this is cause and effect," she says.

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

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DAY IN DAY OUT
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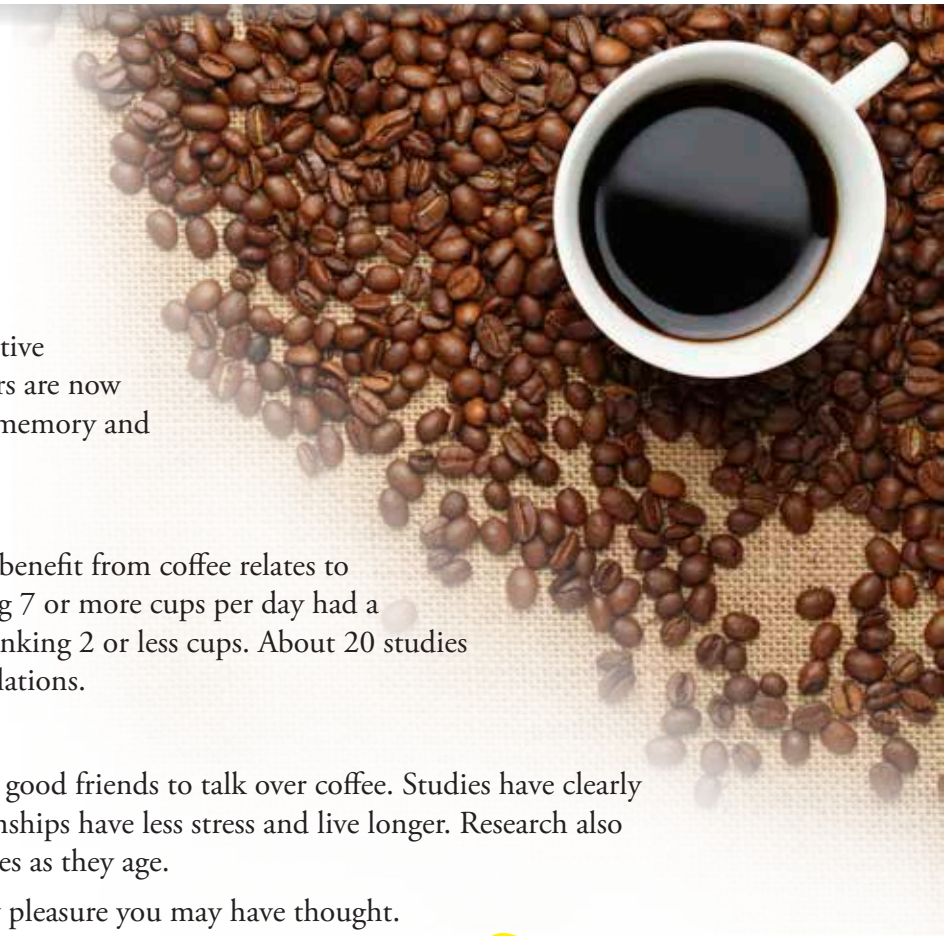
(Continued from previous page)



Coffee & Your Mental Acuity

Some studies suggest coffee may have other positive effects on the mind. Galpern says that researchers are now looking into the potential effects of caffeine on memory and Alzheimer's disease.

Coffee & Type 2 Diabetes

Perhaps the strongest research showing a health benefit from coffee relates to type 2 diabetes. In a 2002 study, people drinking 7 or more cups per day had a 50% lower risk of type 2 diabetes than those drinking 2 or less cups. About 20 studies have now looked into the effect in various populations.

Coffee & Your Social Life

Coffee can also help your social life, if you meet good friends to talk over coffee. Studies have clearly shown that people who have more social relationships have less stress and live longer. Research also suggests they're less likely to show mental declines as they age.

So go enjoy that cup of coffee. It's not the guilty pleasure you may have thought.

For Healthier Coffee Drinking

- Drink coffee that's been filtered through paper.
- Avoid specialty coffee drinks loaded with sugar and fat, which can contribute to weight gain.
- Consider adding a little non-fat milk if you're concerned about bone health.
- Don't drink caffeinated coffee late in the day if you have trouble sleeping.
- Avoid caffeinated coffee if you're pregnant.

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WELCOA'S ONLINE SELF-CARE BULLETIN

WORRIED SICK!

Living With Anxiety Disorders

Anxiety is an uneasy feeling that something may harm you or a loved one. This feeling can be normal and sometimes even helpful. If you're starting a new job or taking a test, it might make you more alert and ready for action. But sometimes anxiety can linger or become overwhelming. When it gets in the way of good health and peace of mind, it's called an anxiety disorder.

If you have an anxiety disorder, you're not alone. Each year, tens of millions of Americans of all ages suffer from long-term anxiety. Among children, anxiety disorders are the most common form of mental illness—one they may carry into adulthood.

For those with anxiety disorders, fears, worries and anxieties can cause so much distress that they interfere with daily life. The anxiety grows out of proportion to the stressful situation or occurs when there is no real danger.

Anxiety's Toll on Your Body

Anxiety activates the body's stress response. Nearly all the cells, tissues and organs in your body go on high-alert. This stress response can wear your body down over time. People with chronic (long-term) anxiety have a higher risk of both physical and mental health problems. Some people visit their doctors because of headaches, racing heart or other physical complaints without realizing that these symptoms may be connected to how anxious they feel.

Treating Anxiety

Treatment for anxiety disorders usually includes both medication and cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT).

Suspect an Anxiety Disorder?

- The first person to see is your family doctor or nurse practitioner.
- The next step may be talking to a mental health professional. Consider finding someone trained in cognitive-behavioral therapy who is also open to using medication if needed.
- Consider joining a self-help or support group to share problems and achievements with others. Stress management techniques and meditation can also help.

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

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WORRIED SICK!

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CBT is a form of talk therapy. It helps people change both the thinking patterns that support their fears and the way they react to anxiety-provoking situations. Current treatments can be highly effective for most people.

Promising Research Continues

Researchers are also using advanced imaging tools to pinpoint the areas in the brain that underlie anxiety disorders. Still in its very early stages, this approach represents a major shift from how doctors usually diagnose mental illness, which is by looking at symptoms and behaviors. Using an imaging technique called functional MRI (fMRI), scientists are scanning the brain in action—as it thinks, remembers, feels emotion and regulates the body's reactions to things that cause anxiety. By measuring changes in blood flow related to brain activity, fMRI scans produce full-color images of trouble spots in real time.

Dr. Sonia Bishop of the University of California-Berkeley uses fMRI to study people at high risk for anxiety disorders. Her team hopes to prevent anxiety disorders before patients enter a downward spiral. The researchers are working to develop a new type of CBT-related treatment that helps to retrain how patients regulate their emotions and attention.

Scientists are especially curious about brain regions called the amygdala and the hippocampus. The amygdala plays an important role in fear and anxiety by alerting the brain to danger. The hippocampus translates threatening events into memories. Once scientists discover if and how these areas contribute to illness, they might be able to develop better treatments.

If you are troubled by anxiety, the first person to see is your family doctor or nurse practitioner. He or she can check for any underlying physical illness or a related condition. You may be referred to a mental health specialist, who might help to identify the specific type of anxiety disorder and the appropriate treatment. With proper care, most people with anxiety disorders can lead normal, fulfilling lives.

Major Types Of Anxiety Disorders

Phobias - Intense, irrational fears triggered by things that pose little or no real danger, such as heights, dogs or spiders. Among the anxiety disorders, specific phobias are the most common.

Social anxiety disorder - Leads to extreme anxiety and self-consciousness in everyday social situations. Also known as social phobia.

Post-traumatic stress disorder - Caused by trauma. This condition leads to flashbacks, nightmares and insomnia. Often accompanied by depression or substance abuse, post-traumatic stress disorder can occur at any age, including childhood.

Generalized anxiety disorder - Excessive worry about a variety of everyday problems.

Panic disorder - Sudden attacks of terror accompanied by physical symptoms that may include heart palpitations, shortness of breath, dizziness, or abdominal distress. Panic disorder is one of the most treatable of anxiety disorders.

Obsessive-compulsive disorder - Persistent, upsetting thoughts (obsessions) and repetitive rituals (compulsions), like hand washing, counting, checking or cleaning. These behaviors are done in the hope of preventing the thoughts or making them go away.

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