



The Stress Connection

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Stress is something that we all have and try each day to combat, but many times it gets the better of us. It is helpful to learn what stress is and how can we learn to better cope with it. Stress is the physiological response of the body to any demand being placed upon it at any given time. The body responds to physical and emotional stress by producing hormones from the adrenal glands, such as cortisol and epinephrine. These hormones are released into the blood and prepare the body to fight perceived dangers by increasing blood pressure and heart rate and by making more energy available for fuel. This is useful when physical action is necessary to escape danger, such as outrunning a cheetah, but in today's world, there is little outlet for the body's physiological adaptations. With little opportunity to vent stress physically, the body turns its response inward, reducing the effectiveness of our organ systems. The results in our body are strain on our organ systems and the symptoms of stress, such as fatigue, anxiety, insomnia, body pain and decreased immune function, as well as increased risks of disease. With chronic stress, conditions such as ulcers, heart disease, and cancer are more likely to develop. Because stress can be so dangerous and debilitating, it's important for us to learn how to deal effectively with it as it occurs, and ideally, prevent or reduce its occurrence in the first place.

Stress-related disorders are not always caused by stress itself; but rather, result from nutrient deficiencies and increased by-products of stress. Since stress increases the body's metabolism, it also increases nutrient requirements, so a healthy, nutrient dense diet is essential to support stress management. It is wise to increase water intake, consumption of whole grains, nuts, seeds, fresh fruit and vegetables, which offer a host of omega fatty acids, vitamins and minerals for adrenal gland function. The adrenal glands rely particularly on B vitamins and vitamin C, which are abundant in whole grains and fruits. Avoid simple carbohydrates, processed and refined foods and high salt content foods, which are unhealthy and actually require energy for the body to process. Most importantly, avoid stimulants such as caffeine, alcohol and tobacco which act as helpful short term stress management tools, but actually tire out our adrenal glands and contribute to virtually every disease we know of!

Regular exercise is a crucial component of stress reduction programs as it helps nutrient delivery in all tissues, increases endurance and energy levels, supports healthy adrenal gland function, and helps with elimination of waste products and toxins. Aim to exercise moderately for 30 to 40 minutes three to four times a week to best support the adrenal glands, and get advice from a specialist in exercise. Make sure to get your heart rate up during aerobic exercise, and also do weight bearing activities to maintain strong bones.

Relaxation exercises help to "turn down" the adrenals and reduce the body's overall nutrient needs. Relaxing restores the body, and is a necessary part of each and every day. It brings the nervous system back to the parasympathetic, or resting mode, where healing and sleep occur, food is digested, and the heart rate and pulse decrease. Simple ways to improve the stress response and adrenal health are to take 3 deep breaths before commencing a meal, and practice 10 deep breaths daily during relaxing times and when stress is at a peak.

Above all else, make sure to have fun. Find activities that you enjoy doing and people you enjoy being with and make them a regular part of your routine. Dealing with stress well begins with education and small, sustainable changes, and there is help available. Naturopathic Medicine offers help in the form of lifestyle, nutrient and natural supplementation programs that are designed specifically for your body's needs for health and overall balance.