

STRESS AND YOUR HEART

Can managing stress reduce or prevent heart disease?

Managing stress makes sense for your overall health. But current data don't yet support specific recommendations about stress reduction as a proven therapy for cardiovascular disease.

Background

"Stress" response describes the condition caused by a person's reaction to physical, chemical, emotional or environmental factors. Stress can refer to physical effort and mental tension. It's hard to define a high level of emotional or psychological stress to measure in a precise way. All people feel stress, but they feel it in different amounts and react to it in different ways.

More and more evidence suggests a relationship between the risk of cardiovascular disease and environmental and psychosocial factors. These factors include job strain, social isolation and personality traits. But more research is needed on how stress contributes to heart disease risk. We don't know if stress acts as an "independent" risk factor for cardiovascular disease. Acute and chronic stress may affect other risk factors and behaviors, such as high blood pressure and cholesterol levels, smoking, physical inactivity and overeating.

More research is also needed on stress's role in heart disease risk among women and minorities. Also, only a few studies have examined how well treatment or therapy works to reduce the effects of stress on cardiovascular disease. Studies using psychosocial therapies to prevent second heart attacks are promising. After a heart attack or stroke, people who feel depressed, anxious or overwhelmed by stress should talk to their doctor or other healthcare professional. These feelings are relatively common, and help is available.

Managing Stress

Think about the times in your life when you've felt stress: maybe while giving a presentation at work, worrying about your children, racing to meet a deadline, or arguing with your spouse. Remember how your heart was pounding and you were breathing harder? People with heart failure need to avoid that kind of physical response to stress.

Emotional stress and anxiety make the heart work harder, which can make symptoms worse. That's why patients and their caregivers should work together to keep stress under control.

Naturally, people with heart failure feel anxious about their diagnosis and what might happen to them or their families. And everyone has certain stress-causing "triggers" — things such as rush-hour traffic, a demanding boss, finances or family conflict. No one can control all of these challenges, but there are ways to cope with them better. Here are 12 good strategies for reducing stress. Use them if you have heart failure, or pass them along to a loved one who does.

- Talk with family, friends, clergy or other trusted advisers about your concerns and stresses and ask for their support.
- Take 15 to 20 minutes a day to sit quietly, breathe deeply and think of a peaceful scene.
- Learn to accept things you can't change. You don't have to solve all of life's problems.
- Count to 10 before answering or responding when you feel angry.
- Don't use smoking, drinking, overeating, drugs or caffeine to cope with stress. These make things worse.
- Look for the good in situations instead of the bad.
- Exercise regularly. Do something you enjoy, like walking, swimming, jogging, golfing, walking a pet, tai chi or cycling. Check with your doctor to determine what activity level is right for you.
- Think ahead about what may upset you and try to avoid it. For example, spend less time with people who bother you. If you're still working or volunteering, cut back on your hours and adjust your schedule to avoid driving in rush-hour traffic.
- Plan productive solutions to problems. For example, talk with your neighbor if the dog next door bothers you, and set clear limits on how much you'll do for family members.
- Learn to say no. Don't promise too much. Give yourself enough time to get things done.
- Join a support group ... maybe for people with heart disease, for women, for men, for retired persons, or some other group with which you identify.
- Seek out a mental health professional or counselor if you can't cope on your own. Helping people is their specialty. Ask your doctor, family or friends for recommendations. If they can't help, ask your spiritual leader or a hospital social worker for some names.