

What causes stress? When you feel threatened, your body launches a response called “fight-or-flight.” This stress response prepares you to either fight the danger or run away. Fight-or-flight is meant to protect you—like avoiding a speeding car that’s rushing at you. But when stress triggers the fight-or-flight response day after day, it becomes unhealthy.²

1 How Stress Affects Your Blood Pressure

Stress itself doesn’t *cause* high blood pressure, but it can have an effect on your blood pressure levels.

When you’re under stress, your body’s stress response kicks in:³

- Chemicals called hormones surge through your body.
- Hormones make your heart beat faster and your blood vessels narrow.
- Your blood pressure rises.
- Once the stress has passed, your blood vessels widen again and your blood pressure goes back down.

Being stressed out once in a while is normal. But if you’re under constant stress, you may start to cope with this stress in an unhealthy way.

How you react to stress affects your blood pressure

Some people deal with stress in ways that raise their blood pressure, including:⁴

- Drinking too much alcohol
- Overeating or eating a lot of salty snacks
- Smoking
- Not getting enough sleep
- Forgetting to take their blood pressure medicine

Learning to cope with your stress in a healthier way can help you reach your blood pressure goal.

2 Learn What Stresses You Out

Before you can manage your stress, you need to learn what stresses you out.

Stress can be due to major life changes, like losing your job or home. Or, it can be caused by everyday hassles like stress at work or worrying about crime in your neighborhood. Even positive events such as a wedding or the birth of a baby can cause stress. Check off your biggest sources of stress in the last year.

Major Stressors

- Job stress
- Divorce or separation
- Being out of work
- Racial discrimination
- Money problems
- Caring for a child alone
- Not having health care
- Illness or injury
- Death of a loved one
- Other _____

Stressors That May Be Part of Your Daily Life

- Crime/your safety
- Work deadlines
- Housework
- Paying bills
- Busy schedule
- Not sleeping enough
- Not eating well
- Traffic jams
- Family life
- Other _____



3 Getting a Little Help From Your Friends

When you’re going through hard times, your friends and family members can be a huge support. Surround yourself with people who care about you and they’ll be there to help you in difficult times.

To make sure you have support when you need it:

- Meet new friends by volunteering or joining a community center, social club, or church.
- Keep in touch with your closest friends by phone or email.
- Go out to a movie or for a meal with your friends every few weeks, just to spend time together.
- When your friends help you, say “thank you” to show that you appreciate them.

4 Coping With Stress

You can’t always avoid stress, but you can control how it affects your body. Don’t try to be *strong* and live with your stress. Ignoring stress won’t make it go away and it can get worse.

Here are a few positive ways to deal with stress before it can harm your health:

- **Exercise**—it causes your brain to release chemicals called endorphins that can make you feel good.⁵ Talk to your doctor before beginning any exercise program.
- **Take a deep breath**—it sends more oxygen to your body and tells your brain to calm down.
- **Laugh**—creates healthy physical changes in your body. It lowers levels of stress and makes you feel more relaxed.⁵
- **Listen to music**—it can ease your troubled mind, and it may also help lower your blood pressure.⁶
- **Practice gratitude**—focus on the positive and express that to others. This can help you feel better and reduce stress.
- **Pray**—it may help relax you and keep your blood pressure under control.⁷

