

## The Healthy Side of Stress

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When we talk about stress and our health, we usually are talking about how it prevents health. From stomach aches to cancer, stress has been linked to many diseases.

But stress isn't all bad. Stress refers to that heightened state of arousal that comes when we feel like our resources can't meet the demands that are placed on us. How could this be positive?

The adrenals are small glands that perch on top of the kidneys, secreting a hormone called cortisol, along with the adrenaline hormones, epinephrine and norepinephrine. Adrenaline is important, and so is the stress response... it creates lightning fast reflexes that catch toddlers who are about to take a fall and gives us the clarity to manage a crisis on minimal sleep. Cortisol is important too; it breaks down body tissue into glucose that the brain and muscles can use to perform these feats.

That stress response is common to all animals, including humans. But most animals don't suffer from insomnia, stomach aches or cancer. Part of this is because they honor the stress response, which is meant to be a cycle.

When stressed, we are meant to move... run when afraid, fight when angry, dance when celebrating. Then rest. We humans have days that are packed with crises and emotional events, but void of movement. We ruminate on events rather than react, which leaves cortisol and adrenaline circulating at high levels. In the same way cortisol helpfully provides food to tissues in need, in excess it breaks down healthy tissue and causes damage to the body.

How can we prevent a good thing from becoming too much? First, minimize excess stressors. Watching TV shows, from trauma-drenched cop shows to cliff-hanging reality shows creates an emotional response that is as real to your body as something you experience first hand. Wind down before bed by turning off the TV and computer. Instead, do some favorite yoga poses or journal about your day. It will help discharge the excess anxiety, and let you experience a more natural light cycle (a signal to your body that it is time to rest).

Second, recouple movement with stress. While it might be impractical to wrestle a co-worker who angers you, it may be possible to go for a walk, even around the building, or to do some deep knee bends at your desk or in the bathroom. Moving your muscles in times of stress helps absorb excess cortisol, and restore a normal state of alertness.

Finally, when you are feeling overwhelmed, remember your fruits and veggies. Vitamin C concentrates in the adrenal glands and depletes quickly under stress. Keep levels high with lots of fresh and vegetables, which will help you fend off colds and flus, and protect your health long term.

