



## Week Three: Stressed out? Fight back!

*My Heart. My Life.®*

When stress hits, your body releases adrenaline, a hormone that causes your breathing and heart rate to speed up and your blood pressure to rise. These reactions prepare you to deal with the situation — the “fight or flight” response.

Too much stress can contribute to everything from [high blood pressure](#) to asthma to ulcers to irritable bowel syndrome. More research is needed to determine how stress contributes to [heart disease](#) — the No. 1 killer of Americans. But stress may affect behaviors and factors that are proven to increase heart disease risk: high blood pressure and [cholesterol levels](#), [smoking](#), [physical inactivity](#) and [overeating](#). There may also be a link to stroke, possibly because people with high anxiety levels are more likely to smoke and be physically inactive, which are risk factors for stroke.

Stress can also hurt your head, strain your back and make your stomach hurt. It can even zap your energy, wreak havoc on your sleep and make you feel cranky, forgetful and out of control.

When stress is constant, your body remains in high gear off and on for days or weeks at a time. Although the link between stress and heart disease isn't clear, chronic stress may cause some people to drink too much alcohol, which can increase your blood pressure and may damage the artery walls.

### Can managing stress reduce or prevent heart disease?

[Managing stress](#) is a good idea for your overall health, but current research doesn't prove it's effective for preventing heart disease. A few studies have examined how well treatment or therapies work in reducing the effects of stress on cardiovascular disease. Studies using psychosocial therapies — involving both psychological and social aspects — are promising in the prevention of second heart attacks.

### What can you do about stress?

Figuring out how stress pushes your buttons is an important step in dealing with it. To help you feel better in the most stressful moments, try these healthy techniques and repeat the ones that work best for you.

- Practice positive self-talk — Turn negative thoughts into positive ones.
- Find an emergency stress stopper that works for you — Count to 10, take a walk, or take time to think about how a big problem can be broken into smaller pieces.
- Find pleasure — Read a book, play your favorite sport, or call a friend for coffee.
- Schedule daily relaxation time — Try to devote 10 minutes a day to breathing deeply or picturing peaceful scenes.

If your stress is nonstop, stress management classes can also help. Look for them at community colleges, rehab programs, in hospitals or by calling a therapist in your community. See if your workplace offers an employee assistance program. You may be referred to a counselor who can help. You may even want to give yoga a try. The calming benefits may lower your blood pressure and help you feel more relaxed.

Be careful not to confuse stress with anxiety. If you suffer from severe anxiety, talk to your doctor about whether you need medication. Stressful situations can worsen anxiety and depression. Be sure and talk to your doctor if you experience more than situational stress.

### How Can I Make My Life Healthier?

Taking steps to lead a healthier lifestyle can help reduce your stress and your risk of health complications. Here are some heart-healthy suggestions:

- Don't smoke cigarettes or use other tobacco products.
- Have your blood pressure checked regularly. Keep your blood pressure below 120/80 mm Hg.
- Eat a healthy diet consistent with recommendations from the American Heart Association.
- Get at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity or 75 minutes of vigorous-intensity activity (or a combination) each week.
- Maintain a healthy weight (body mass index less than 25 kg/m<sup>2</sup>).
- Keep your total cholesterol at less than 200 mg/dL.
- Keep your fasting blood glucose at less than 100 mg/dL.

