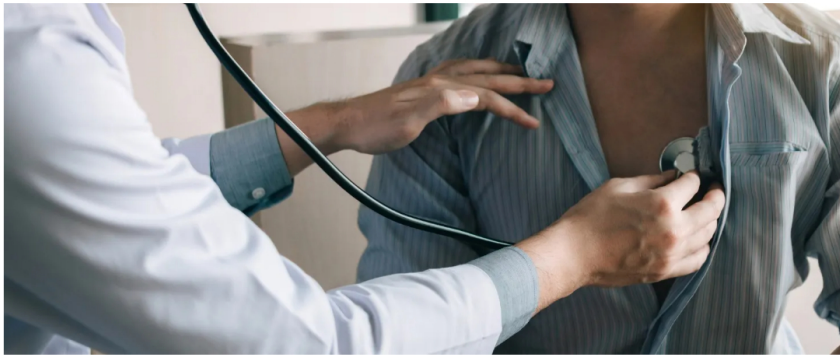




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## All Of The Ways Stress Affects Your Heart Health

FEBRUARY 12, 2020

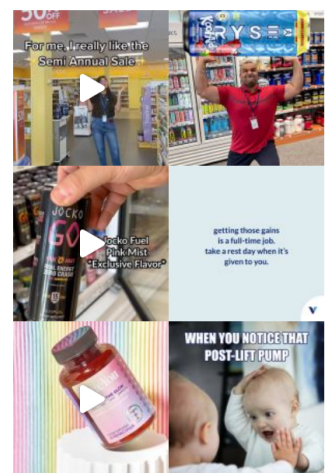
by Maressa Brown

Whether it's everyday headaches, like late bills and car trouble, or major life events, like becoming a parent or getting divorced, [stress](#) is an all-too present part of life these days. For many of us, it's an ongoing issue. According to a [2018 Gallup poll](#), the percentage of Americans that report experiencing stress daily is a stunning 20 percent higher than the global average.

While you may associate stress with sleep and mood issues, it can also take a toll on your heart. "More and more, we are hearing of people being diagnosed with heart problems due to stress," says [Carrie Lam](#), M.D., F.A.A.M.F.M., A.B.A.A.R.M.

Since cardiovascular disease is the leading cause of death for American men and women, the stress-heart health connection is

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For both men and women, the stress-heart health connection is one we *all* need to take seriously. Here's exactly how chronic stress impacts your heart health—and what you can do to mitigate the effects.

## Chronic Stress And Your Body

“Our ‘fight or flight’ stress response is built to turn on and turn off,” says Kevin Gilliland, Psy.D., Executive Director of the Dallas-based counseling group [Innovation360](#). “It’s not supposed to always stay on like an app in the background on our phones.”

When the body perceives stress, it produces the [stress hormone cortisol](#). This hormone keeps you alert and responsive, elevates blood sugar, increases your brain’s energy consumption, and readies the body to repair tissues, according to the [Mayo Clinic](#).

Ideally, this “fight or flight” response is short-lived. The chronic stress many of us experience today, though, doesn’t give the mind and body a break from that response, which takes a toll over time.

When you’re chronically stressed, your adrenal glands constantly pump out cortisol, which has been linked to:

- anxiety
- depression
- digestive problems
- headaches
- sleep problems
- diabetes risk
- increased Alzheimer’s risk
- increased chance of infection
- [Vasoconstriction](#), or constriction of blood vessels

## How Stress Affects Your Heart Health

Stress’ impact on your body doesn’t end there. In fact, stress affects your heart health, specifically, in multiple ways.

“High levels of cortisol production over a period of time can result in elevated blood cholesterol, triglycerides, blood sugar, and blood pressure,” says heart surgeon [Lawrence Schemetterer](#), M.D., F.A.C.S.

According to Lam, high blood pressure also damages the inner lining of blood vessels. “These damaged areas accumulate sugar, fat, and cholesterol particles, causing inflammation and

constriction,” she says.

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Job stress seems to be particularly troublesome for the heart. “People who suffer from job stress have a higher risk of having cardiovascular problems, including heart attacks, and a similarly high chance of dying from heart problems,” says Schemetterer.

One study published in *European Journal of Preventive Cardiology*, for example, linked work stress with a 48 percent higher risk of atrial fibrillation. This common heart rhythm disorder can cause palpitations, weakness, fatigue, lightheadedness, dizziness, and shortness of breath. It’s also responsible for 20 to 30 percent of strokes.

## How To Manage Stress And Protect Your Heart

Knowing exactly how to cope with chronic stress and keep your heart healthy can feel overwhelming. However, several research-proven, expert-approved strategies can help.

### 1. Eat An Anti-Inflammatory Mediterranean Diet

The [Mediterranean diet](#) is rich in minimally processed plant-based foods, abundant in monounsaturated fat from olive oil, and lower in saturated fat, meats, and dairy products.

Read More: [Want To Try The Mediterranean Diet? Here's Exactly What To Eat](#)

This eating style has been associated with positive cardiovascular health outcomes, including lower rates of coronary heart disease, ischemic stroke, and total cardiovascular disease, according to research published in *Circulation Research*.

### 2. Up Your Omega-3s

Adequate levels of [omega-3 fatty acids](#) are crucial for heart health, according [Barry Sears](#), Ph.D., president of the non-profit Inflammation Research Foundation and author of *The Zone Diet* books. He recommends consuming up to four grams of omega-3 fatty acids per day.

### 3. Practice Yoga

## 3. Practice Yoga

According to research published in the [European Journal of Cardiovascular Prevention & Rehabilitation](#), doing even 20 minutes of yoga a few times per week can help treat hypertension and reduce serum cholesterol levels. Yoga may also help fend off [atherosclerosis](#) (the hardening of arteries that can restrict blood flow).

## 4. Try Adaptogenic Herbs

Certain herbs, known as [adaptogens](#), help support the adrenal glands and the body's response to stress. Integrative physician and cardiologist [Patrick Fratellone](#), M.D., often recommends [ashwagandha](#) or [schisandra](#) to patients.

## 5. Do Breathwork

Whether you're stuck in traffic or in bed, breathwork is an easy-to-implement way to ease stress and support your heart.

According to [Susan Davis](#), a Florida-based integrative health coach, even just three rounds of inhaling and exhaling for the same amount of time can help minimize stress. Putting your hand over your heart and tuning into your heartbeat while you breathe can also promote calm, she says.

### Resources & Further Reading

1. [European Journal of Preventative Cardiology: Job strain and atrial fibrillation: Results from the Swedish Longitudinal Occupational Survey of Health and meta-analysis of three studies.](#)
2. [Mayo Clinic: Stress Management.](#)
3. [Circulation Research: The Mediterranean Diet and Cardiovascular Health.](#)
4. [European Society of Cardiology: Yoga has the same potential as exercise to reduce the risk factors of cardiovascular disease.](#)
5. [Indian Journal of Psychological Medicine: A Prospective, Randomized Double-Blind, Placebo-Controlled Study of Safety and Efficacy of a High-Concentration Full-Spectrum Extract of Ashwagandha Root in Reducing Stress and Anxiety in Adults.](#)

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