

# Hep C factsheets

## Dealing with stress



### Introduction

### The positive sides of stress

### The negative side of stress

### Symptoms

### Stress & lifestyle

### Nutrition

### Diet considerations

### Counselling

### Acupuncture

### Massage

### Meditation

### Choose your attitude

### Relaxation

### Exercise

### Some tips to remember

### Also see

## Introduction

Stress is an area in our life that we all need to keep under control. If stress is allowed to increase, unchecked, the impact on one's physical and mental health can be severe.

Some typical signs of stress are insomnia, headache, neck, shoulder and back pain, heart palpitations, fatigue, irritability, panic attacks, loss of concentration and low self esteem. There are a number of areas in our lives, though, where we can take action to control our levels of stress.

## The positive sides of stress

Stress is not necessarily always negative. Without the action of positive stress, many people would not attempt to reach their full potential. For example, competitive tension usually keeps a footballer or salesperson working to their best.

There is an optimal level of stress at which a person is likely to be most productive. Knowing one's particular stress level is useful.

## The negative side of stress

When pressure is continual and when the feeling that you are not in control stays with you over a long period of time, you're probably suffering the negative effects of stress. When this happens you'll feel overworked but will actually be contributing less and less.

Physically, pulse rate will increase, blood pressure will rise, perspiration increases and there is an increase in blood adrenalin levels.

## Symptoms

You may feel irritable, anxious, nervous or fatigued. There is often a change in appetite and perhaps an increase in cigarette smoking or drinking alcohol.

Other symptoms may include diarrhoea, abdominal cramps, insomnia, trembling, urinary infrequency, increased heart rate and headaches or backaches. As mentioned previously, palpitations, fatigue, irritability, panic attacks, loss of concentration and low self esteem may occur as well.

To date, surprisingly little long-term research has been done on the effects of stress - although it has been linked to ulcers, infertility, heart disease, mental illness and cancer.

## Stress & lifestyle

Stress is a normal response to lifestyle and work, and the general challenges of living. A certain level of stress is fine and even necessary in order to be productive.

However, too much stress can be a health hazard. People need to learn to be aware of when their stress level is unhealthy. Once stress overload is recognised you can assess your current lifestyle, but there are skills you can use to address stress - see below.

## **Nutrition**

When we experience stress and nervous tension, our bodies use up large amounts of nutrients (vitamins and minerals.) This can cause dietary deficiencies which in turn leave us tired, run down, irritable and less able to cope with stress - back to square one!

Nutrients which are particularly related to stress are Vitamin C, the B complex vitamins, and the minerals calcium, magnesium, phosphorus and zinc. These nutrients can be supplemented by eating healthy foods high in vitamin and mineral content, or by taking tablets or medicinal herbs.

## **Diet considerations**

The best diet to cope with stress contains fresh wholesome foods - lots of: fruit & vegetables, beans, lentils, bread & cereals; moderate amounts of: dairy foods, lean meat, skinless poultry, fish & nuts; and small amounts of oils and fats. Salt should be avoided.

## **Counselling**

We all live and interact with other people and often cope better with our problems and life stresses by talking and sharing our feelings with other people.

This can be as simple as talking with a neighbour or friend over a glass of juice or mineral water [or writing a letter or story for your favourite newsletter.]

Some people may need to phone a friend or relative specifically to talk about a particular problem. Additionally, many people choose to go to a trained counsellor, social worker or therapist.

## **Acupuncture**

Acupuncture has been shown to be a very effective treatment for various conditions as well as a stress management tool. It's best to see a qualified practitioner who belongs to a professional body - see page 25 for details.

## **Massage**

Whether done by a trained professional or just a friend, a massage is a simple and inexpensive way of releasing tension from our bodies.

If done regularly, a massage can also make for a welcome break from a daily routine.

## **Meditation**

Meditation is a technique that offers a structured way to reduce tension and stress. Although it may not provide an immediate release of stress, over time a meditation program will prepare you to handle physical and mental problems and recharge your system.

Structured exercise and concentration programs such as Tai Chi and yoga are also very effective in reducing stress.

## **Choose your attitude**

Take some control over the thoughts that go through your mind. We all have such thoughts, some of us more so than others.

Talk yourself out of repeating negative or unhelpful self thoughts. You will be surprised at how much difference this can make after a short period of time.

## **Relaxation**

Relaxation can mean spending time at the beach or local park, doing hobbies or listening to your favourite music.

The big obstacle to relaxation is physical tension. Relaxation is often the end result of stress management exercises such as those mentioned above.

## **Exercise**

Physical exercise can often help to release tension and improves your overall level of health. The most helpful thing is to do exercise moderately and regularly.

Any physical exercise is helpful eg. jogging, swimming, gardening, playing team sports. If you have a particular health ailment [ie. hepatitis C], you may find it useful talking to your doctor about which sports may be most suitable.

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### Some tips to remember

- Be aware of physical and mental stress and recognise the signs.
- Stress is only a problem if it is excessive or if you are not handling it properly.
- You are not the only one who experiences the problems that lead to stress - such problems are a normal part of everyday life.
- Try not to make problems any bigger than they actually are.
- Identify situations that are stressful for you - deal with them or avoid them.
- Practice relaxation techniques.
- Find interests that really involve your concentration.
- Plug into support networks - formal or informal.
- Grow a garden and get a pet if practical.
- Take regular time out.
- Talk to others about your feelings.
- Live in the present and not in the past.
- Cultivate regular stillness and quietness in your life.
- Set daily routines, giving yourself time for some of the above ideas.

### Also see

*Complementary and Alternative Therapies for Hepatitis C* (booklet)

*Complementary Medicine* (factsheet)

*Diet and Staying Healthy* (factsheet)

*The Guide to Healthy Eating for People with Hepatitis C* (booklet)

For further information about dealing with stress, contact the NSW Mental Health Information Service  
02 9816 5688 - Sydney callers  
1800 674 200 - NSW toll free

- Compiled by the NSW Association for Mental Health from *Strategies for Stress* (Dr David Lake) & *Coping with Stress* (Leichhardt Women Health Centre).

This factsheet was produced by the Hepatitis C Council of NSW and was last reviewed in Jan 2008

*Hep C Helpline* and *HepConnect* (peer support): 02 9332 1599 / 1800 803 990

Web info: [www.hepatitisc.org.au](http://www.hepatitisc.org.au) Web peer support: [www.hepcaustralasia.org](http://www.hepcaustralasia.org)

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