

CHRONIC STRESS

can lead to chronic health conditions

Feeling stressed?

Too much stress can affect both your emotional and physical health.

To identify your life stressors visit www.smmccares.com, click on "Health Resources," then "Risk Assessments" and scroll down to "Stress Trigger Assessment."

Don't Worry, Be Happy

Simple steps to defuse some of the stress in your life.

Exercise. Regular exercise helps your brain to produce those feel-good endorphins, the hormones that elevate your mood; distracts you from negative thoughts; boosts your energy level and burns calories.

Get sufficient sleep. The National Sleep Foundation recommends at least 7 to 8 hours nightly for adults.

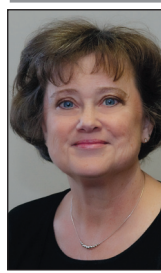
Share your feelings. Talk with a friend, a family member or a therapist, or keep a journal.

Spend time with friends and family. Studies show that people with strong social support networks — groups of friends and family that provide a sense of belonging, security, and a listening ear — handle stress better.

Meditate. Meditation, or guided thought, takes many forms: a slow, repetitive exercise like yoga or tai chi; relaxation training; stretching or deep breathing.

Indulge your sweet tooth. Yes — eat some chocolate! A recent study at the Nestle Research Center in Lausanne, Switzerland and published in the Journal of Poteome Research found that eating the equivalent of one medium-sized dark chocolate bar (1.4 ounces) each day for two weeks decreased the level of the stress hormone cortisol and other fight-or-flight hormones in patients with high anxiety. Self-serving as it may seem, the study does add to a growing body of research about the health benefits of dark chocolate, including improved insulin sensitivity, reduced blood pressure, and improved mood. Just don't forget to exercise!

Stress is an unfortunate fact of life for most people: that feeling of worry, dread or nervous anticipation that accompanies the challenges we deal with on the job or in the home, during our daily commute or er-



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rands, or in our dealings with family, friends or colleagues.

When we encounter a stressful situation — no matter how nerve-racking it may be, our body physically reacts, releasing hormones that enable us to deal with the circumstances: the well-known 'fight or flight' reaction. These hormones — adrenaline, which increases our heart rate; and cortisol, which elevates the blood pressure and increases the amount of blood sugar in our system — were intended to help us to survive imminent danger.

Nowadays, we're not dealing with short, intense survival situations such as wild animals or unfriendly cave dwellers — instead, the source of stress might be the cubicle dweller next door, a family member you don't see eye-to-eye with, or gridlock on the interstate. Today, the "stressors" in our lives are more likely to be prolonged, continual irritants — and our bodies have less recovery time between one stressful episode and the next. This lack of "down

Go Red For Women Luncheon Thursday

Dr. Cynthia Rutledge and Dr. Sue Roberts are the featured speakers at Thursday's "Go Red For Women Event & Luncheon" beginning at 11:30 a.m. at the Dora Roberts Community Center in Comanche Trail Park.

Women and the men who love them are invited to attend this free luncheon, presented by Scenic

Mountain Medical Center's Healthy Woman program. "A Woman's Heart" will focus what women can do to lead a heart-healthy life style.

A complimentary heart healthy lunch will be served, so reservations are required.

For more details or to RSVP, call Kim Howell at 268-4842 or Anita Cline at 268-4721.

time" between periods of stress can adversely impact our health.

What happens when our bodies release chemicals designed to fight danger and the sources of this stress remain or we don't get sufficient rest recovery between one stressful event and the next? This prolonged, continual stress — on and off, for days or weeks at a time — is known as chronic stress. Chronic stress has been linked to numerous health problems, such as high blood pressure and high cholesterol, cardiovascular problems, headaches and stomach pain, depression, and a weakened immune system.

Studies have not proven that stress directly causes health problems, but it contributes to behavioral and lifestyle habits that negatively affect our health. For example, stress does not cause high blood pressure, according to the American Heart Association, but the coping mechanisms that Americans use to deal with stress — most of them unhealthy — do. These include eating foods high in fat and sodium which leads to being overweight, drinking excess alcohol, smoking and being too tired to be

physically active.

Likewise, the link between stress and heart disease is not a direct correlation, but it's known that chronic stress causes an increase in the heart rate and blood pressure. Long-term, this may contribute to coronary artery disease — damage to the walls of the arteries which, in turn, can contribute to an increased risk of a heart attack. Stress is also linked to blood clots, arrhythmia (abnormal heartbeat) and heart failure.

Stress can also make you sick. Stress-related hormones affect the immune system, decreasing the body's ability to fight off colds and other respiratory infections. Research has shown that people under continual stress get colds and flu more often, and heal more slowly after being injured. The continual tension in the muscles when you are stressed can lead to neck, shoulder and low back pain — and stress can further inflame joint conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis.

Stress can make pre-existing conditions worse, such as asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD), or irritable bowel syndrome (IBS). People with asthma who are under extreme stress can experience

more severe and frequent asthma attacks, because chronic stress prompts the body to release the hormones that dilate blood vessels, intensifying the lungs inflammatory response, and constricts the airways.

Stress shows up in other ways, as well. It is one of the primary contributors to skin conditions like acne, as well as psoriasis, a chronic skin condition and autoimmune disease characterized by itchy, red, scaly skin and painful joints.

Stress can also cause us to lose sleep, costing us valuable recharging time.

While we sleep, the body resets various internal functions lowering blood pressure; rejuvenating muscles; restoring energy; and releasing hormones that regulate appetite, internal organ function, our immune system, and tissue growth and repair. Insufficient sleep also inhibits our ability to effectively deal with the stress we encounter during the day.

Board-certified in Family Medicine and experienced in caring for a broad range of health concerns, Dr. Cynthia Rutledge has been a part of the experienced and dedicated medical team at Family Medical Center for nearly 8 years. To schedule a consultation with her, call 267-5531.