



Heart Disease and Stress

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Although stress can sometimes be a good thing, too much stress can actually harm your health and increase your risk of heart disease and stroke. Many life events such as beginning or leaving school, moving, changing jobs, and experiencing losses can cause stress. However, day to day chronic stress can often cause a greater negative impact on health than do more acute, traumatic events - which generally have a start point and an end point. Dealing with things such as daily traffic hassles, finishing homework assignments, or facing constant deadlines can cause more harm. Studies have also shown that chronic stress is often associated with much higher risks of cardiovascular disease. This occurs because of a compromised immune system.

Humans experience stress, or perceive things as stressful, when they do not believe they can cope with what they are facing. Symptoms may include a sense of being overwhelmed, irritable, insecure, nervous, lack of appetite, experiencing panic attacks, exhaustion, skin rashes, insomnia, migraine, or digestive symptoms. It may also cause more serious conditions such as heart problems - as some people with prolonged or high levels of stress may have higher blood cholesterol, increased blood pressure, or be more prone to developing atherosclerosis (narrowing of the arteries). People under chronic stress are prone to more frequent and severe viral infections, such as the flu or common cold - and vaccines such as the flu shot are less effective for them. Long-term

exposure to stress can also lead to mental health problems such as depression and anxiety.

Responding to stress with anger can also be harmful, since it sets off a series of physical changes including increased heart rate and elevated blood pressure levels which can increase your chance of having a heart attack. People who are prone to anger are also more likely to turn to unhealthy behaviours such as smoking, excessive alcohol consumption and overeating leading to increased risk of heart disease and stroke. So it is important to identify the source of your stress and take steps to manage it.

If your life is stressful, it can be difficult to lead a healthy lifestyle, however, there are lots of ways to relieve the stress you may be feeling; talk to friends and family, take time for yourself, laugh, eat well, and take vacations. Being physically active is a great stress reliever too. Be sure to talk to your physician before starting any activity program.

Mosaic Primary Care Network has resources to assist you and help you to learn coping strategies to manage stress and decrease the harmful effects on your health.

You can sign up for a workshop on Stress Management by calling 403.276.1555, check mosaicpcn.ca for more information, or if one-to-one counselling is needed, talk to your physician about a referral to a Mosaic Mental Health Therapist. All these resources are free to patients of Mosaic member physicians. □



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