Can stress kill? [1]

Dear Alice,

Can stress really kill, and if so, why?

?Worried about Stress

Answer

Dear Worried about Stress,

Although stress does not usually lead directly to one's demise, long-term exposure can increase a person's chances of developing life-threatening conditions. Stress is an influential force that can either fuel us through a public speaking engagement or make us feel sick to our stomach. One common response to stress is what scientists have called "fight or flight." When you feel threatened your pituitary gland sends signals throughout your body to increase the amount of hormones released in your bloodstream. In response to your brain's signal, your adrenal glands release cortisol and adrenaline. These hormones help to increase your strength and agility and also speed up your reaction time. In short-term stressful situations, this process is a positive one that pushes you to work harder or avoid danger.

On the flip side, the long term effects of stress can have a negative impact on your body. When the body releases more hormones than normal, your equilibrium is thrown off. If this process continues at a constant level (due to continual and repetitive stress) your body never gets the recovery time it needs between stressful situations. As a result of this constant stress on the body, risk factors for obesity, insomnia, digestive complaints, and depression increase. Continual and repetitive stress is related to six of the top causes of death including cirrhosis of the liver, heart disease, lung ailments, accidents, cancer, and suicide.

A few side effects of stress include:

- Increased appetite, which can lead to weight gain.
- Decreased stomach acids, which slows metabolism.
- Increased blood pressure.
- Upset stomach.
- Chest pain.

Due to increased levels of cortisol, stress can raise the risk for autoimmune diseases as well. It can also aggravate any autoimmune ailments that one already has by suppressing your body's ability to react properly. Those with autoimmune diseases such as Lupus often suffer
Stress is dependent on the individual; your personality, time-management abilities, career, and genetic makeup all affect your relationship with stress. Inherited traits may make one person more predisposed to a negative reaction to stress than another. Personality is also a factor when dealing with stress and it may be affected by the level of stress one faced as a child. Because many character traits develop at an early age and our environment influences our growth, children who faced extreme stress are more likely to be vulnerable to stress as adults.

A healthy diet, regular sleep patterns, meditation, and exercise are all key activities that will help you manage stress effectively. Each person is unique, one stress-coping technique may work better than others. Check out a Stressbusters event or their many resources available online for more information. Also, talking with someone else can sometimes help lower your stress levels; an outside opinion can often give you a new perspective on something you could not originally take a step back from. Approaching a friend or family member whom you can talk with may help diffuse stressful situations or anxiety. Here’s another tip: practice these and other stress coping activities even when you don’t feel stressed. This may help prevent high stress levels in the first place.

If your stress levels are interfering with your day-to-day activities, making you feel ill, or keeping you up at night, it may be useful to consult a professional. Columbia students on the Morningside campus can make an appointment with a counselor at Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) and Medical Center campus students should reach out to Mental Health Services. Part of beating stress is a determination to keep it from taking over your life. Ultimately, keeping both your mind and body as healthy as possible, especially when stress appears in multiple arenas of your life, is your best defense.

Alice!
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