Can stress kill? [1]

Dear Alice,

Can stress really kill, and if so, why?

— Worried about Stress

Answer

Dear Worried about Stress,

Although stress doesn’t usually lead directly to a person’s demise, long-term exposure can increase the chances of developing life-threatening conditions. Stress is an influential force that can either fuel someone through a public speaking engagement or make them feel sick to their stomach. When someone experiences stress, the body perceives a threat and responds with the "fight or flight" response. The pituitary gland sends signals throughout the body to increase the amount of hormones released in the bloodstream. In response to these brain signals, the adrenal glands release cortisol and adrenaline. These hormones, in turn, help to increase strength, agility, and also speed up reaction time. This happens not only in response to negative stressful situations but also in response to positive situations (more on that later). If the body’s production of these hormones increases more than normal due to sustained stress, that’s when it can negatively impact health. Knowing more about how the body responds to chronic stress, some self-care strategies, and who to reach out to for support are all key factors to be aware of in order to minimize any negative health impacts.

When a person experiences stress, the “fight or flight” response begins. In short-term stressful situations, this process is a positive one that may push people to work harder or avoid danger. This stress response occurs whether a person is experiencing positive or negative stress. For example, while receiving a job promotion, taking a vacation, or learning a new skill may generally be thought of as positive life events, they still evoke the biological stress response. Interestingly though, the body isn’t always able to distinguish between positive and life-threatening events. The body registers that a stressful event has occurred and begins responding, regardless of whether the stress is due to an event that is exciting or threatening. When a person experiences chronic stress, the body releases more hormones than usual and the equilibrium is thrown off. If this process is constant due to continual and repetitive stress, the body never gets the recovery
time it needs between stressful situations.

The increased levels of hormones from chronic stress can trigger responses in the body that increase risk factors for obesity, insomnia, digestive complaints, and depression. Additionally, the increased levels of cortisol can raise a person’s risk for autoimmune diseases or aggravate autoimmune ailments that they already have, as stress can suppress the body’s ability to react properly. Those with autoimmune diseases, such as lupus, often suffer from flare-ups when subjected to constant stress. What’s more, 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.

Some of the common side effects of stress are an increased appetite (potentially leading to weight gain), decreased stomach acids (potentially leading to slower metabolism), increased blood pressure, an upset stomach, and chest pain. However, every person experiences stress differently; factors such as personality, time-management abilities, career, and genetic makeup all affect a person’s 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 faced during childhood. People who faced extreme stress during childhood are more likely to be vulnerable to stress as adults, as many character traits develop at a young age and the childhood environment influences growth.

Just as a person’s stressors are unique, how they cope with them is also unique — what works for one person isn’t necessarily going to work for someone else. Talking about stressors with someone else may be helpful; an outside view may provide a new perspective that would’ve been hard to realize without their help. Approaching a friend or family member to talk with may help diffuse stressful situations or anxiety. Also, eating a balanced diet, getting enough quality sleep, and being physically active can help effectively manage stress. Furthermore, incorporating these and other stress coping activities regularly, regardless of feeling particularly stressed, may help prevent high stress levels in the first place. A health promotion professional can help advise on how to build these behaviors into a regular routine of self-care.

However, if stress levels are interfering with day-to-day activities, interrupt sleep, or seem to be linked to not feeling well physically, it may be useful to consult a health care provider or a mental health professional. Part of keeping stress in check is a determination to keep it from becoming overwhelming. Ultimately, keeping both the mind and body as healthy as possible, especially when stress appears in multiple life arenas, is the best defense.

Alice!

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