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Can stress from school cause nausea and stomachaches? ^[1]

Hi Alice,

I'm a student in the midst of midterms and all that, so I've been really busy and not taking as good care of myself as usual (though trying my best), though I wouldn't say that I've been any more stressed than your average student. My question has to do with nausea though: I've been waking up lately and my stomach hurts and I don't know why. I can't think of any medical/strictly physiological reason why, so I was wondering: is it possible that this is stress related? (Can stress/anxiety make one sick with a knot in their stomach??) This has only happened a few times, recently, all during this midterm/work craziness.

Thanks,
Sick from Stress???

Answer

Dear Sick from Stress???,

Although any college student is probably used to the feeling of being sick *of* stress, it is possible, as you suggested, that you are sick from stress as well. The relationship ^[2] between the gut and the brain is a close one. It's generally recognized that psychological or emotional trauma or upsets can cause nausea and vomiting in some people. These symptoms have been reported to occur under highly stressful conditions such as loss of a job, death of a loved one, or anxiety about school or work.

Another thing to think about is if your eating and drinking habits change when you're pressed for time. The caffeine in coffee or tea, which many rely on to get through a long night of hitting the books, can often cause an upset stomach. Acidic drinks like citrus juices can also have this effect, as well as foods that are spicy or have lots of fat. If you find that your diet changes to include more of these things, such as eating more takeout or fast food when you are busy, then this might also be another culprit responsible for your stomach sorrows.

Many other conditions could be responsible for stomach pains or nausea, ranging from lactose intolerance, constipation, heartburn or indigestion, to food poisoning. If the nausea or vomiting occurs soon after eating a particular food or medication, is accompanied or follows dizziness, or

lasts continuously for 48 hours, see a medical professional immediately. Mild stomach pains and nausea may be relieved or lessened by sipping water or other clear liquids, avoiding solid foods until your stomach feels better, or taking antacids if you think it's related to heartburn. If you are in doubt of whether or not to see your health care provider, it's best to err on the side of caution and go see her/him. Besides making sure that your symptoms are not due to a serious or life-threatening condition, s/he can help in finding out what is causing your nausea, as well as help you to end it for good.

To combat the stress (and hopefully your nausea and stomachaches) associated with midterms or finals keep these stress-management tips in mind:

- Take frequent study breaks, even if only for a few minutes at a time.
- Plan ahead and schedule study time for each class so you know you will get to everything.
- Be physically active most days, alone or with friends — even a brisk 20-minute walk around campus will do.
- Eat healthy and balanced meals, and plan ahead to have healthy snacks available during study time.
- Get a full night's rest most nights.
- Practice meditation, breathing exercises, yoga, or other relaxation techniques.

Good luck with your exams and papers. It's a good idea to take care of your grades, but also remember to take care of yourself and your body. Learning to manage stress is a life skill that will serve you well during midterms, finals, and throughout all of your endeavors.

Alice!

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