HEALTH

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# Stress Symptoms

Stress can significantly impact your body. Whether immediate stress or chronic stress, both create a wave of nervous system reaction that has rippling effects throughout the body.

## WHAT HAPPENS IN A STRESS RESPONSE?

In an acute stress response like seeing a lion or swerving to avoid a car collision, our bodies flood with an evolutionary nervous system response coined “Fight or Flight.” This can create a variety of immediate symptoms ranging from increased heart rate, muscle tension, pupil dilation, sweating, nausea, stomach pain, chest pain, and difficulty breathing. Usually, these symptoms resolve once the threat is removed and some time has passed (could be minutes, hours, or even a few days).

In prolonged stress response, your body makes more significant adaptations. Symptoms can include: anxiety, low mood, irritability, exhaustion, poor sleep or insomnia, trouble concentrating, isolation, dreams or flashbacks, reckless or aggressive behavior, limited heart rate variability, heart palpitations, increased risk for heart attack, increased risk for stroke, persistent nausea, chest pain, tension headaches, migraines, back pain, acne breakouts, eczema flare ups, autoimmune disorder flare ups, decreased immune response, increased bloating, increased hunger, decreased hunger, increased caloric burn, decreased calorie burn...it is specific to your body.

Is this the first time you are hearing this? Probably not! Here is a quick review of why these things happen:

Perception of distress or threat in the brain triggers a cascading effect of hormones through the autonomic nervous system. Your brain fires out a signal to the adrenal glands for epinephrine. Epinephrine causes the immediate symptoms above like increased heart rate and blood pressure, faster breathing, extra oxygen is sent to the brain, and release of glucose and fats from storage sites to give a burst of available energy. This happens fast – so fast that you can automatically

respond to a threat without thinking.

After the surge of epinephrine, the hypothalamus then activates a complimentary system called the HPA Axis. If the brain continues to perceive a threat, it continues to stay engaged. This Axis ultimately engages the adrenal glands to produce cortisol, also known as the stress hormone.

If your body stays engaged in the Fight or Flight response for too long with the HPA Axis activated and cortisol levels staying high, it impairs the communication between your immune system and the HPA Axis. This disconnect has been linked to chronic fatigue, significant physical and mental conditions, metabolic disorders, leaky gut, and immune disorders. “It’s not so much what chronic stress does to the nervous system, but what continuous activation of the nervous system does to other bodily systems that become problematic.”[1]

KEY TAKEAWAY: ANS response is an evolutionary advantage. However, when in prolonged states of stress yielding high levels of cortisol, the toll on your body is far-reaching. Stress management and reduction of persistent cortisol is a key component in your health journey.

1| American Psychological Association. (2018, November 1). *Stress effects on the body.* https://www.apa.org/topics/stress/body