[IMAGE]

Stress: America’s Great Headache

By Dr. Jared Skowron

America has some of the most stressed people in the world. So many things in our life cause stress: family, relationships, career, money, kids, family and friends at war, gas prices, and my personal favorite - expectations. We all know of these external stressors, but are we aware of the internal stressors? Smoking, drinking, unhealthy foods, anxiety and toxins (for a listing of toxins by U.S. county, visit www.scorecard.org) are examples of internal stressors.

image - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark Stress is our body’s response to the world. Our body responds with biochemical responses of the adrenal and nervous system, which affect every other part of our body. The "fight or flight" sympathetic response, joined by other chemicals such as adrenaline and cortisol, are released in response to a perceived stressor. Let’s review how these chemicals and stress reactions affect our entire body.

Stress Diseases

Many people with high-stress jobs get ulcers. Reactions to stress decrease the immune system. With a lower immune system, organisms can grow in the stomach and intestines. *H. pylori* grows in the stomach unhindered and causes ulcers. Other bacteria, viruses and yeast (such as *Candida albicans*) can grow in the intestines when the immune system is suppressed. This causes irritable bowel syndrome, diarrhea, constipation, bloating and gas.

A stressed out office worker covered in post it notes. - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark People with suppressed immune systems get fewer colds. This seems paradoxical, but it’s true. Many people with constant high stress in their life avoid healthy immune responses for years on end. It’s when they go on vacation or the stress load diminishes that they get a cold. This is due to the decreased stress response and allows the immune system to function again. The bacteria or virus that has been unchecked in the body is then attacked, and we experience the symptoms of fever, malaise, cough, rhinitis and swollen lymph glands. These are all healthy immune responses. Although uncomfortable, they are the body’s way of removing foreign organisms.

Cardiac health is worsened with constant high levels of stress. Electrolyte depletion of heart cells, along with vascular inflammation from stress and elevated homocysteine levels, increase the risk for heart attacks and atherosclerosis, which are all worsened by chronic stress response.

Insomnia, another of our nation's common complaints, is directly related to perceived stress. Melatonin secretion, elevated neurotransmitter levels and nocturnal cortisol spikes are chemical reasons we can't stay asleep. Having trouble falling asleep or staying asleep, or having thoughts racing through our minds, are brain stress responses. This is the same biochemical area as lack of focus or adult attention deficit. All are caused by excessive stress response.

Many cases of hypothyroid actually are misdiagnosed. When our stress chemicals rise, our thyroid levels decrease (similar to suppression of immune response). Many people take thyroid medications but don't feel 100 percent better. This is because the problem is in the adrenal hormones, and the thyroid is *not* the root of the problem.

Testing Stress

So, why don't many doctors test the adrenals? Stress testing in conventional medicine is mostly related to cardiac health. A treadmill, ECG and even stress echocardiograms test how your heart responds to stress. However, rarely are the stress organs - the adrenal glands - tested for their stress response. Getting your adrenal hormones tested is essential. Adrenal cortisol (one of the major stress hormones) fluctuates throughout the day on a diurnal cycle. It should be high when we wake up to give us energy, and low when we go to sleep. Normally, four salivary samples are taken during one day. Four blood samples could be taken, but would be troublesome for most people, and salivary cortisol is accurate. Your doctor can perform a salivary adrenal test. It's the first step to feeling better.

A woman doing yoga and a healthy lunch on a dining table. - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark The results of an adrenal test will show elevations or suppressions of our stress response. Different therapies can modulate and regulate adrenal hormones. Herbal remedies, homeopathic medicines and vitamin, mineral and glandular therapies are all possible options to heal your body. The correct treatment is better selected from adrenal test results.

Eliminating Stress

You also can start to decrease your stress *today*. Exercise is the first step to feeling better. Daily walking, jogging, biking, swimming, lifting weights or competitive sports should be started immediately. The key is making it a daily habit and choosing something you enjoy. No excuses! Exercise at the same time every day. If you feel tired after you exercise, then exercise before bed. If you feel energized after you exercise, then exercise when you wake up. If your day is full, find 20 minutes and do it. Remember, no excuses. Calming exercise techniques such as yoga, *tai chi* or meditation also are beneficial. They will extend your life and increase the quality of every day.

Food choices can increase your internal stress, so a great way to relax is by eating the right foods. No coffee. No soda. No sugar. No excuses. You might be thinking, "I need these just to wake up!" Today is the day to start feeling better. You could stop cold turkey, before you get to the end of this paragraph. Or you might take baby steps and take two weeks or more. Either way, you will be choosing to live longer and healthier. Try green tea instead of coffee and soda. Try fruits instead of ice cream and cookies. I like freezing bananas, grapes, and berries in the summer. If you have a juicer, you can make sorbet with the frozen fruits! Whatever you choose, it’s better than the alternatives. Coffee, soda and sugar are stressing you out.

The next step to decreasing stress involves balancing your perceived stress. While changing the stressors might be difficult, we easily can change our response to stress. Some people will react to stress with fear, some with grief, some with anger, some with denial, even when it’s the same stress. That reaction is our choice. You choose (sometimes subconsciously) how you react to the events in your life. This might be easier said than done because we habitually react in certain ways, especially with family that we’ve been reacting to the same way for decades. However, it *must* be done. Take a different look at the world. Volunteer at a soup kitchen or as a big brother/sister. Helping others gives us a different perspective of our lives. Journaling also is important. Writing down our emotions and feelings is one way to get the stress out of our body. Daily journaling for 20 minutes is proven to decrease stress and inflammation, and even reduce arthritis pain.

Changing your response to stress will make you more energetic, happier and healthier. While the "fight or flight" response saved many of our ancestors from the pursuing tiger, there are few tigers chasing us today. Our overactive stress response in our fear-laden country is one of the lead factors for the chronic disease in our country today. Why are we 42nd in life expectancy in the world? Stress. Why do people in Europe, Asia, South America and Australia live longer and happier? Better stress response. Choose happiness. Choose health. Choose to let the little stuff go.

Jared Skowron, ND, teaches pediatrics at the University of Bridgeport and is a certified DAN (Defeat Autism Now) doctor. He is the author of *Fundamentals of Naturopathic Pediatrics*. Visit www.naturopathicanswer.com to learn more.

Page printed from:
http://www.toyourhealth.com/mpacms/tyh/article.php?id=1047&pagenumber=3&no_paginate=true&no_b=true