

[IMAGE]

Less Stress, Healthier Heart

By Editorial Staff

Heart disease is the leading cause of death in the U.S., and research suggests it's no coincidence that the average American suffers from high levels of daily and long-term stress. While the precise connection between the two isn't clear, we do know that stress encourages the release of cortisol – the so-called "stress hormone." In a 2010 study, subjects with high cortisol levels had a fivefold increase in cardiovascular-related death (heart attack, stroke or other cardiovascular causes) compared to subjects with lower cortisol levels.

But hormones aren't the only potential connection between stress and heart disease. Stress, whether acute or chronic, can make you more likely to engage in a wide variety of heart-unhealthy behaviors, including poor diet / overeating, poor sleep, lack of exercise, and even alcohol / drug abuse.

In short, more stress equals a less healthy heart. Fortunately, there are easy ways to mitigate stress when it forces its way into your life. Here are three strategies to keep stress at bay and improve your heart health in the process.

1. *Interval Living*: In exercise, interval training refers to training that involves bursts of speed or extra effort at set intervals; for example, 10 minutes of easy running interspersed with several 30-second sprints along the way. *Interval living* takes this principal and applies it to your hectic life ... sort of. In this case, the intervals are actually the reverse of training intervals; they're periodic *breaks* in your busy routine. Stress builds up when we feel overwhelmed, so committing to set breaks – even for five minutes at a time – in your day is a great way to let off steam and keep stress from accumulating. Get away from your desk, take a walk, give the kids something to do or read a good book; you'll be amazed by the results.
2. yoga - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark LOL: Stress relief is often a phone call away, or in this day and age, a text, tweet or Facebook posting away. When your day's going south and stress is piling up, contact a friend or loved one and talk about anything except what's got you stressed. There's plenty of time to vent about your bad job, unruly kids or unmanageable home later (another great way to reduce stress); but for now, the goal is simple: laugh. Tell a joke, make up a funny story or talk about

something you found humorous on TV the night before. Why? Because laughter has been shown to reduce cortisol levels, among other benefits.

3. *Lunch Date:* While stress can lead to binge eating, consuming the right foods in moments of stress can actually have a therapeutic effect. For example, studies suggest that irritability and poor mood are linked to potassium deficiencies, while low serotonin levels are associated with fear and avoidance – both characteristics of stress. The nutritional solution? Try baked potatoes, lima beans and avocado to up your potassium levels, and bananas, oranges and turkey to ensure adequate intake of tryptophan, which the body converts to serotonin. Great foods to improve your overall health and reduce stress at the same time.

Your doctor can give you more information about the health dangers of stress and provide tips on how to reduce stress before it does real damage.

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