

Stress: Maybe You Can't Avoid It, But You Can Manage It

Unless you're completely free of anger, worry, deadlines and all other sources of tension in everyday life—and who is?—you're going to feel some stress now and then. Is this bad for your heart? The research isn't clear on that. One study by Canadian scientists showed that highly stressed heart patients did not respond as well as others to medication for angina and chest pain. And the American Heart Association (AHA) says patients with heart failure should take steps to reduce and manage stress to reduce strain on their hearts.

Does stress actually cause heart disease? The scientific jury is still out on that question. The AHA does not list stress as a major risk factor in coronary heart disease. It does say that the way an individual *responds* to stress may be a contributing factor. It notes, for example, that people under stress may bring on known risk factors by overeating, starting to smoke or smoke more than they otherwise would. The key is to cope with stress in healthy ways and to avoid situations that make it worse.

For instance, everyone who does much driving gets cut off in traffic now and then, getting a burst of adrenaline produced by fear or anger. Some people can quickly relax and return to a normal physical state. Others stew about the incident. They might make things even worse by discussing it with others who share that hostility, and who may feed it with stories of their own.

In heart failure, the heart muscle is weakened and the patient needs to take care not to make it work any harder than necessary. So here it's important to reduce physical symptoms of stress—a pounding heart and heavy breathing—as much as possible. Though avoiding all stress may be impossible, you may be able to adjust your activities to avoid stress triggers like rush-hour traffic or long hours at work.

Support groups are recommended for coping with all the emotional factors in heart disease, from stress to anger and anxiety. One of the largest and best known is Mended Hearts (www.mendedhearts.org), which has hundreds of chapters nationwide and thousands of volunteers available to visit new heart patients.

By Tom Gray
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