

TOXIC STRESS

AND HOW IT AFFECTS A WOMAN'S HEALTH

 COLUMN BY NISHA JACKSON

Stress has become ubiquitous, as if no one is immune to it anymore. Although stress has been highly published in the last 10 years, and we now understand that excessive or toxic stress is damaging to your health, there continues to be a lack of information about how stress may uniquely affect the female body. The difference between women and men as it pertains to the “response” to stress is quite different. Studies have found that women differ from men not only in their emotional responses to stress, but also short term and long term stress may indeed take a greater toll on women’s physical and emotional health.



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We have learned from research spanning over 30 years now that stress is a major contributor to disease, including heart disease, cancer, nervous system disorders, autoimmune disorders, depression, anxiety, diabetes, obesity, adrenal dysfunction (stress gland dysfunction), and many more. The World Health Organization estimates that by the year 2020, stress related disorders will be the second leading cause of disabilities in the world.

When reacting to stress, our body releases hormones such as cortisol from the adrenal glands, which is known to impact the immune system, digestive system, skin, neuro-brain chemicals, and more. These cortisol releases over time vary between men and women. Below you will see the 10 ways in which stress can undermine your health as a female (though most pertain to men as well).

- **Chronic Fatigue/Loss of Drive:** The over-production of cortisol from a traumatic one-time event or continual struggle with daily stressors such as chronic pain, work stress, insomnia, or anger can leave the adrenals fatigued. This may initially cause over-production of cortisol (“get up and go” hormone) followed by an under-production of cortisol. This ultimately results in exhaustion during the day and wired at night—the reverse energy rhythm.
- **Poor Digestion:** Prolonged stress greatly impacts the digestion. Increasing stomach acid leading to indigestion, constipation, diarrhea, irritable bowel, and inflammation of the digestive system, causing poor assimilation of nutrients and minerals in the gut and additional health complications.
- **Depression/Anxiety/Lack of Focus:** Women have twice the likelihood of men for depression related to stress. Depression, anxiety, nervousness, cravings, and focus issues (brain scramble) are all connected to stress and how stress alters brain signals and chemical balance.
- **Hair Loss:** Stress affects the health of hair follicles through inflammation. Loss of hair can be immediate or occur months after a stressful event(s).
- **Insomnia:** Cortisol over-production at night is often the culprit for insomnia. Under producing cortisol during the day (when you need it) with elevated levels at night will cause wakefulness, insomnia, and lack of deep or restorative sleep.

- **Weight Gain:** Research has linked high cortisol to a larger belly measurement and lower metabolism. High stress levels are also correlated with increased appetite, sugar cravings (think comfort food), unstable glucose, and elevated insulin (fat storage) levels.
- **Decreased Fertility/Irregular Periods/Cystic Breasts:** A study published in fertility and sterility revealed that women who had high levels of alpha-amylase, an enzyme linked to stress, had a more difficult time getting pregnant. Additionally, stress can cause missed ovulations leading to a drop in progesterone production, irregular periods, and cystic breasts.
- **Acne/Skin Problems:** Elevated cortisol can lead to excessive oil production contributing to acne breakouts. Hormonal changes related to stress (estrogen dominance) leads to acne, facial hair, dry skin, and excessively oily skin.
- **Reduced Sex Drive:** Stress pretty much kills a sex drive for most women. The elevated cortisol suppresses the body’s production of sex hormones (testosterone). Professor Thompson at UCSD published a study revealing women who maintained active sex lives had a better quality of life, were happier, and ultimately supported other psychological aspects of successful aging.
- **Heart Disease/Stroke/High Blood Pressure:** Women who have high amounts of stress at work are 40 percent more likely to experience some heart event (high blood pressure, heart attack, stroke) than women who report low levels of job-stress.

SO, NOW WHAT?

Here is the short list of what you can do to sustain your health while still managing your daily life stressors.

- **Move your body a minimum of 30 minutes per day.** Blow off some steam, sweat, and get outside so that nature can heal you. If you do not move your body, your stress has nowhere to go and remains inside you!

- Take supplements to support optimal cortisol levels.
- Enjoy 10 minutes of silence. Get to a quiet place, close your eyes, turn off your phone and computer, and just breathe—you can't imagine how good this is for you!
- Eat regularly throughout the day (every four hours) to allow glucose levels to stay stable, which in turn supports optimal cortisol levels. Avoid sugar (especially on an empty stomach) and eat protein with high fiber veggie carbs and good fats to optimize insulin and glucose ratios (less belly fat).
- Get your hormones tested. Understanding where the deficits are in your overall hormone balance can be instrumental in supporting the stress system (adrenal system).
- Laughing, socializing, friendly support, talking, and connecting are all essential for stress management.
- Planning one day a month (especially as a mother) that you can get away for the day and/or night by yourself or with a close friend (no children) may save your life. After working with women for 25 years, I have found that the women who do this consistently are the happiest women I know!
- Fortunately we live in a day and age that we can seek alternative treatments that have shown great promise. Oxygen treatments offered with HBOT (www.curesauna.com) can be very helpful for energy and restoration to the body and mind. IV Nutrient therapy allows the nutrients infused through an IV to move directly into the blood stream and cells without the challenges of traveling through the gut.

So, as women, let's bring in 2017 with a different game plan for managing our stress, while overcoming the health challenges that toxic stress can bring!

Cheers to your Health! 🍷

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Nisha Jackson is a nationally recognized hormone expert and gynecology health specialist. Her private practice specializes in women's health and the treatment for hormone imbalances for men and women. Jackson is nationally recognized as a lecturer, motivational speaker, radio host, columnist, and author. Jackson owns a medical practice in Medford and Roseburg, Oregon, and a supplement/health company called Balance Docs.



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