

STRESS, ALCOHOL AND DEPRESSION **A Resource from the American College of Preventive Medicine**

A Guide for Patients **You Can Beat Stress and Win the Battle of the Blues**

Stress ... it's all around us. We can't avoid it. We experience it at work, in traffic, at home. Nearly 3 out of 4 people's lives are negatively affected by stress. It shows in our emotions – anxiety, anger, irritation, frustration, impatience.

Our body reacts to stressful situations the same way every time. It's the fight or flight response. In prehistoric times, it prepared us to fight or flee a predator. Our brain releases a series of hormones that increases our alertness, heart rate, blood pressure and breathing, directs blood flow to our muscles and away from our internal organs, causes sugar to be released into our blood for energy, and causes our blood to thicken so it clots faster in case of injury. They are all good things if we're in a fight for our lives. And, as soon as the fight is over, everything returns to normal.

Unfortunately, it doesn't work so well with the kind of stress we have today. We don't fight or flee, so our body remains in overdrive. We continue to feel the emotions of stress, our heart rate and blood pressure remain elevated, our blood sugar remains elevated, and so on.

So, what can we do about it? A lot, and it's easier than you think.

It's not about the stressor ... it's about the stessee

First, realize that the stressor is not the real problem. It is usually unavoidable. The problem is how we react to a stressful situation. We can control this response. In the moment of stress, we can slow our body's response by practicing what is called the relaxation response. It involves just a minute or two of deep, slow breathing, and thinking about how the situation is making us feel, and why it is not worth becoming upset over. Focus on a positive thought, something to be grateful for. This helps in the moment of stress, but we need more.

We need to help our body return to its normal resting state – to lower our heart rate, blood pressure and blood sugar. If we don't do this, we increase our risk for a number of health problems, including the big three -- obesity, diabetes and heart disease.

The opposite of stress is relaxation ... and enjoyment

The key is finding something that leaves us feeling relaxed. For many, it is exercise - a long walk, working out at a gym, some Tai Chi or yoga. For others, it's a hot bath, talking to a friend, reading a book, some meditation. What works best for each of us is something we truly enjoy, that totally relaxes us, and that we will use regularly, especially in times of stress.

Too much alcohol is bad for stress ... and bad for the brain

Unfortunately, many of us turn to alcohol to relax and escape our problems. In fact, a small amount of alcohol can be relaxing, but there is a fine line between help and harm. A safe amount of alcohol is no more than two drinks a day for men, one for women. But, everyone's tolerance is different, just as our response to stress is different. Some people should not drink any alcohol. Problems occur when we

exceed the safe amount. Binge drinking, or about 4 to 5 drinks in a two hour period, is particularly harmful. As the blood alcohol level rises, it becomes increasingly harmful to the brain. It increases the release of stress hormones and reduces brain chemicals that make us feel good. The initial feeling of "relaxation" is short lived; it ends up sustaining the overstressed state instead of reducing stress.

Drinking too much can also make us more susceptible to every day stress, which can lead to a cycle of more drinking and more stress. It's a bad combination that can leave us with chronically unbalanced brain chemicals. And, it can contribute to depression.

Depression is real ... but it is treatable, and treatment is effective

Feelings of sadness, hopelessness, lethargy, and worthlessness ... these are symptoms of depression. Depression is a real disease, like high blood pressure or diabetes, and it is very common. Anti-depressants are the most commonly prescribed drugs; only high blood pressure accounts for more visits to the doctor every year. One in every 20 people has a bout of depression every year. It has many causes. Our genes can make us more susceptible, but other factors, such as stress, alcohol, drugs, and some medications contribute. Stress seems to have a more serious impact on people prone to depression.

Depression is now recognized as a chronic disease. It can come and go. A healthy lifestyle is the foundation for managing it. This means controlling stress, minimal alcohol, regular exercise and a healthy diet. Medications are often needed to re-balance brain chemicals. Counseling is also helpful to understand why you feel the way you do, and to learn strategies to manage these feelings, and the stress in your life.

Many people with depression are embarrassed to admit it, or to ask for help. Some people don't even realize they can be helped, and that they don't have to live with feelings of despair. Depression is real; it is treatable, and treatment works. Stress is unavoidable, but it is manageable. Finding an escape from stress makes life more enjoyable and it improves symptoms of depression.

Bottom Line

- Be aware of the stress in your life and how you react to it.
- Find a way to let go of stress, and use this means of relaxation regularly.
- If you ever feel like you just can't get out of a slump, ask your doctor about it.
- If you enjoy alcohol, keep it to a moderate level (no more than 2 drinks per day for men and one for women).
- Alcohol misuse causes many health problems besides depression, including heart, liver and kidney disease and some cancers.

Uncontrolled stress, excessive alcohol and depression threaten not only our quality of life, but our life itself. They create a downward spiral that changes how we think about life and how we live each day. All of us have times when we feel down, or in a bad mood, for a day or two. But, if it lasts 2 weeks or more, it could be depression. Call your doctor to get it checked out. If you have an alcohol problem, get it evaluated too. This first call is the toughest, but the most important step. It's the first step to feeling better. You will be glad you took it.

For other information and useful links, visit the American College of Preventive Medicine website at www.acpm.org.