The Body Under Constant Pressure

How ongoing stress can affect your body - and what can help

Physical & Mental Health Series - Resource 2 of 10

Pressure is physical as well as emotional

Stress is not only something we think about. The body participates. When demands feel urgent, uncertain or difficult, the autonomic nervous system and stress-hormone systems help us mobilise. That can be useful for a short challenge. When pressure becomes frequent and recovery is scarce, the same protective systems can leave us feeling wired, tense, depleted or physically uncomfortable.

Adrenaline can increase alertness, heart rate and breathing. Cortisol helps make energy available and coordinates a wider stress response. These processes are normal. The issue is not that stress hormones are 'bad'; it is that repeated activation, combined with insufficient recovery and other health factors, can contribute to strain over time.

What you may notice

Area	Possible stress-related experiences
Muscles	Tight shoulders, jaw clenching, neck/back tension, general aches
Head	Tension-type headaches, feeling light-headed or 'foggy'
Heart/breathing	Faster heartbeat, awareness of heartbeat, quicker or shallower breathing
Digestion	Indigestion, nausea, stomach discomfort, appetite or bowel changes
Energy	Feeling wired but tired, heavy fatigue, reduced stamina
Sleep	Difficulty winding down, waking, restless or unrefreshing sleep
Mind	Poor concentration, forgetfulness, irritability, worry, feeling overwhelmed

These symptoms can have many causes. Persistent, severe, new or worrying symptoms should be assessed appropriately rather than automatically attributed to stress.

From alarm to recovery

The sympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system supports mobilisation: preparing the body to act. The parasympathetic system is involved in processes associated with rest, digestion and recovery. Healthy regulation is not about staying relaxed all day; it is about being able to move between activation and recovery as circumstances change.

When pressure keeps arriving

Deadlines, caring responsibilities, financial worries, conflict, sensory overload, uncertainty, workload, pain and lack of sleep can all add to total demand. The body does not require a dramatic emergency before it responds. Repeated smaller pressures can accumulate, especially when there is little opportunity to recover.

Muscles and pain

Muscles commonly tense during stress. If this becomes habitual, people may notice jaw clenching, shoulder elevation, neck tension or headaches. Stress can also amplify the experience of existing pain. Gentle movement, posture changes, warmth and appropriate clinical support may help, depending on the cause.

Heart and blood vessels

Acute stress can temporarily increase heart rate and blood pressure. Chronic stress is associated with cardiovascular risk, but health outcomes are influenced by many factors including genetics, smoking, sleep, activity, diet and existing medical conditions. Stress should therefore be understood as one part of a wider picture rather than a single explanation.

Breathing

Pressure can make breathing faster or shallower. Some people begin to over-breathe when anxious, which can contribute to dizziness, tingling or a sense of breathlessness. Slower, comfortable breathing can be useful for some people, but new or significant breathing problems require medical assessment.

Not every body needs the same calming technique

For some people, being told to 'take a deep breath' increases discomfort. Alternatives include stretching, walking, changing sensory input, sipping water, grounding through the feet or simply reducing demands for a few minutes.

Digestion, sleep, immunity and energy

The stress response interacts with systems throughout the body. This is one reason ongoing pressure can feel so physically broad.

The gut-brain connection

The brain and gastrointestinal system communicate continuously. Stress can influence gut movement, sensitivity and appetite, while digestive discomfort can itself increase stress. People may notice reflux, nausea, abdominal discomfort, diarrhoea, constipation or appetite changes. Symptoms that persist, involve bleeding, unexplained weight loss, severe pain or other concerning changes should be medically reviewed.

Sleep: tired but unable to switch off

Stress can interfere with falling asleep, staying asleep or waking refreshed. Poor sleep then reduces coping capacity and can increase emotional reactivity the following day. The result can be a loop: pressure disrupts sleep; reduced sleep makes pressure harder to manage.

Immune function

Stress hormones interact with immune and inflammatory processes. Research links chronic stress with changes in immune functioning, although the relationship is complex and differs between individuals. It is more accurate to say that prolonged stress can influence immune regulation than to assume every illness is caused by stress.

Energy and exhaustion

Constant activation uses resources. People may alternate between feeling restless and feeling completely depleted. Fatigue can also have medical causes, so ongoing or unexplained tiredness deserves assessment - particularly when it is new, severe or accompanied by other symptoms.

What 'wired and tired' can look like

Wired	Tired
Racing thoughts Checking constantly Restlessness Jaw/shoulder tension Difficulty sitting still Feeling on edge	Heavy body Reduced motivation Brain fog Needing more recovery Emotional flatness Feeling unable to start

Supporting a body under pressure

The aim is not to force the body to relax. It is to reduce unnecessary load and create repeated opportunities for recovery.

Reduce the demand before adding another technique

Sometimes the most effective intervention is practical: fewer simultaneous tasks, a clearer boundary, a quieter environment, a realistic deadline, help from another person, or permission to postpone something. Coping strategies matter, but they should not become another list of things you are failing to do.

Micro-recovery

Recovery does not have to begin with an hour-long routine. Try 30 seconds of unclenching the jaw, two minutes away from a screen, a slower walk to the kitchen, sitting while drinking, changing position, stepping outside or allowing silence between tasks. Repetition matters more than perfection.

Food and fluids

Pressure can make basic needs easy to overlook. Where possible, use routines, reminders or accessible foods/drinks that fit your individual needs. If eating is difficult because of sensory needs, anxiety, an eating disorder, gastrointestinal symptoms or another condition, generic nutrition advice may not be appropriate; individual support can be more useful.

Movement

Movement can help discharge some physical activation and support general health. It does not have to mean strenuous exercise. Walking, stretching, mobility work or other tolerable movement may be enough to change the body's state. Adapt activity to your health, mobility and energy.

Sleep preparation

Create a transition rather than expecting the nervous system to move instantly from full-speed activity to sleep. Lower stimulation where possible, reduce work immediately before bed, externalise tomorrow's tasks onto paper, and use a repeatable wind-down cue.

A kinder target

Instead of asking 'How do I make myself calm?', try: 'What would reduce the pressure on my body by 5% right now?'

Body Pressure Tracker

Use this to identify patterns across several days. It is not a diagnostic tool.

Check-in	0-10 / notes
Overall pressure in my body	
Muscle/jaw tension	
Headache or head pressure	
Digestive discomfort	
Heart/breathing awareness	
Fatigue	
Difficulty switching off	
Sleep quality last night	
How much recovery have I had?	
One thing my body needs next	

When your body needs more than self-help

Please seek medical advice for symptoms that are persistent, recurrent, worsening or concerning. Urgent symptoms - such as severe/new chest pain, collapse, severe difficulty breathing, signs of stroke, or another suspected emergency - require urgent medical care. In the UK, use 999 for a life-threatening emergency and NHS 111 when you need urgent advice but it is not an emergency.

Psychological support may be useful when pressure is being driven by anxiety, trauma, perfectionism, workload, relationship difficulties, caring responsibilities, neurodivergent overload or a long period of simply having too much to carry.

A message from Maggie

Your body is not separate from the life you are living. If you have spent months or years pushing through, your body may be carrying part of that story in tension, exhaustion, headaches, poor sleep, digestive changes or the feeling that you can never completely switch off.

Listening does not mean becoming frightened of every sensation. It means becoming curious. What has today asked of me? When did I last recover? Am I treating exhaustion as an instruction to rest, or as another obstacle to overcome?

You do not have to wait until your body forces you to stop before you begin supporting it. Small, regular moments of recovery count. Reducing pressure counts. Asking for help counts. And looking after your physical health is part of looking after your mental health.

Books & further reading

Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers - Robert M. Sapolsky. A detailed but accessible exploration of the biology of stress.

Burnout - Emily Nagoski & Amelia Nagoski. Explores stress, recovery and completing the stress response.

The Stress Solution - Dr Rangan Chatterjee. Practical discussion of stress and everyday health behaviours.

Clinical notes & sources

NHS. Get help with stress. Describes common physical, mental and behavioural symptoms of stress and when to seek help.

World Health Organization. Stress - Questions and answers. Describes stress as a natural response that affects mind and body and discusses effects of excessive stress.

American Psychological Association. Stress effects on the body. Reviews stress-related effects across musculoskeletal, respiratory, cardiovascular, endocrine, gastrointestinal, nervous and reproductive systems.

McEwen BS. Research on allostatic load and the cumulative physiological effects of repeated adaptation to stress has helped explain how chronic stress exposure can influence health across body systems.

Important

This guide is educational and cannot diagnose the cause of physical symptoms or replace individual medical or mental-health care.