

Stress Management: Preventing Stress Through Lifestyle Management¹

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In today's world, most of us can't avoid stress. We *can* learn ways to take care of ourselves so stress does not become a problem. *Taking care of yourself* is the first step in stress management. Some basic lifestyle practices can keep you healthy and strong so you can *prevent stress*.

Are You Vulnerable to Stress?

Start by asking yourself, "How vulnerable am I to stress?" People most at risk of stress are those who eat poorly, chain smoke, drink a lot of beverages with caffeine, sleep a few hours a night, and never exercise. People may not feel much stress when they have a healthy diet, take time to relax, get plenty of sleep, and exercise regularly. If they do, they manage it so it does not become a problem. They have the physical and mental energy to handle stress.

A Healthy Lifestyle

There are many possible lifestyle guidelines that keep you healthy and prevent stress. Here we highlight the most important ones.

- **Avoid cigarettes.** Cigarette smoking is the single most important preventable cause of illness and early death and the effects of smoking can be reversed. People tend to smoke more when under stress.
- **Exercise regularly.** Regular exercise helps people of all ages look and feel better. Different kinds of exercise provide specific health benefits.
- **Eat sensibly.** A nutritious diet is essential for maintaining good health and proper weight. A balanced diet, especially one low in fat or sugar, helps to prevent stress.
- **Get plenty of rest.** Restful sleep helps you maintain health and cope better with problems.
- **If you drink, drink only in moderation.** Alcohol is frequently used to reduce stress because it has a relaxing effect. Regular, heavy use of alcohol leads to disease. Drinking and driving often leads to fatal or crippling accidents.

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- **Avoid too much caffeine.** Caffeine is in many products such as coffee, tea, sodas and chocolate. It speeds up the body and can exaggerate the effects of stress.
- **Use care in taking drugs.** Although drugs may provide temporary relief from stress symptoms they may not solve ongoing problems and tensions. Excessive or continued use of either prescription or illegal drugs may cause physical and mental problems, and absenteeism from work.
- **Be safety conscious.** Falls and injuries from auto or pedestrian accidents can lead to hospitalization and disability. Good safety at home, work, and on the road prevents accidents and injuries.
- **Get health care.** Regular health care helps prevent disease by catching problems early and keeps them from getting worse.
- **Have friends you can talk to.** People who give and receive affection regularly, who can let out their feelings to someone who cares tend to have fewer health problems and cope better with stress.
- **Learn to manage stress.** Some stress is a normal part of living. Three steps keep daily stress from becoming a problem: take time to relax, talk with a friend, and learn to keep a perspective on things that are important and those that are not.

Conclusions

The first thing you can do to manage stress is to prevent it. A healthy lifestyle builds your physical and mental energy. Each of these behaviors helps prevent stress and makes a person less vulnerable to stress when it does occur.

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Publications in the Stress Management Series

For more information see your county Extension Agent and related publications in the Stress Management series:

- *Stress Management: Strategies for Individuals*. Pergola, Joe and Suzanna Smith. (2006). EDIS. Florida Cooperative Extension Service, University of Florida. FCS2077A, <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/FY515>

- *Stress Management: Preventing Stress through Lifestyle Management.* Smith, Suzanna and Joe Pergola. (2006). EDIS. Florida Cooperative Extension Service, University of Florida. FCS2077B, <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/FY516>
- *Stress Management: Ways to Cope.* Smith, Suzanna and Joe Pergola. (2006). EDIS. Florida Cooperative Extension Service, University of Florida. FCS2078, <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/FY517>
- *Stress Management: Understanding Stress.* Smith, Suzanna and Joe Pergola. (2006). EDIS. Florida Cooperative Extension Service, University of Florida. FCS2077B, FCS2080, <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/FY518>
- *Stress Management: Your Lifelines.* Pergola, Joe and Suzanna Smith. (2006). EDIS. StateFlorida Cooperative Extension Service, University of Florida. FCS2081A, <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/FY519>