



Stress and Heart Disease

Stress Defined

A person's stress response describes the condition caused by a reaction to physical, chemical, emotional or environmental factors. Stress can refer to physical effort and mental tension. It's hard to measure emotional or psychological stress in a precise way. However, we do know that the body reacts to stress by releasing hormones, such as adrenaline which prepares the heart and body to respond to a challenge. Unfortunately, during times of stress, the body also releases the "killer" stress hormone – cortisol that can increase the risk of sleeplessness, anxiety, depression, fatigue, immune system deficiencies, obesity, diabetes, ulcers, cancer and heart disease.

Fortunately, natural stress relief remedies, such as adaptogens, have been shown conclusively to help the body eliminate the damaging effects of stress. All people feel stress, but they feel it in different amounts and react to it in different ways.

Chronic Stress

More and more evidence suggests a relationship between the risk of cardiovascular disease and environmental and psychosocial factors. These factors include job strain, social isolation and personality traits. While scientists do not yet know if stress acts as an "independent" risk factor for cardiovascular disease, it is clear that acute and chronic stress may affect other risk factors and behaviors, such as high blood pressure and cholesterol levels, smoking, physical inactivity and overeating – which have been shown to associate with coronary heart disease. High blood pressure and high cholesterol levels are known to have a direct effect on the heart.

In addition to the more than 3,000 studies conducted by the International scientific community on adaptogens as a natural stress relief remedy for the excess production of cortisol, research continues to further understand what happens when the body releases adrenaline and cortisol, and how these chemicals can lead to fatty deposits building up in the arteries; and how it can make blood more likely to clot and increase blood pressure.

New Study

According to one new study, the well-known link between stress and heart disease starts with stress and other factors that can lead to poor health habits. Until now, little was known about exactly how chronic stress led to coronary heart disease. But a recent study in the journal, Psychosomatic Medicine, sheds new light on the potentially deadly process. Funding for the research was provided by grants from the National Institute of Mental Health, the National Institute on Aging, the National Cancer Institute and the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute.

Peter P. Vitaliano, Ph.D., of the University of Washington, reported that while the exact path connecting chronic stress and heart disease may vary from person to person, there appears to be a general pattern, especially in men. First, chronic stress is associated with psychological distress; factors such as unsatisfactory social supports and poor coping skills may contribute to the link. The psychological distress is associated with poor health habits, such as insufficient exercise and poor diet, and a number of changes in body composition and metabolism that are well-established risk factors for heart disease. Eventually, these changes in body composition and chemistry - known collectively as the metabolic syndrome - produce heart disease.



Evidence for this model came from a 2 1/2 year study of 152 married, older adults. Eighty of the subjects were caregivers for spouses with Alzheimer's disease; previous studies had shown that such caregivers routinely experience numerous physical, emotional and financial stressors.

Their findings revealed that the caregivers started from a more vulnerable position than the comparison group, with a greater tendency to suffer from such problems as obesity, depression, and disturbed sleep.

Heart disease was equally prevalent among the caregivers and comparison group when the study began. However, 27 to 30 months later, 54 percent of caregiver men suffered from heart disease, compared to only 26 percent of comparison group men.

His team's findings suggest both a direct, immediate relationship between distress and metabolic syndrome, and an indirect, delayed link where distress promotes poor health habits that, over time, exacerbate metabolic syndrome.

Stress Kills

So stress is a mentally or emotionally disruptive or upsetting condition occurring in response to adverse external influences and can affect physical health; usually characterized by increased heart rate, a rise in blood pressure, muscular tension, irritability, and depression.

For years it has been "common knowledge" that people who are under a lot of stress have an increased risk of heart disease. While most of the medical literature on stress and heart disease refers to physical stress, most people talk about emotional stress.

Physical stress is generally acknowledged to be good. In fact, the lack of physical stress (i.e., a sedentary lifestyle) constitutes a major risk factor for coronary artery disease.

So this kind of "stress" is usually considered to be good for the heart – as long as the heart is normal. But either way, physical stress, in of itself, does not cause heart disease.

As noted, emotional stress, on the other hand, is bad for you especially if it is severe enough or chronic enough. There is a fair amount of emerging evidence and new studies that chronic emotional stress can be associated with heart disease and early death.

More Studies

Some studies, for example, have documented that people without spouses die earlier than married people. Other studies have shown fairly conclusively that people who have had recent major life changes such as loss of a spouse or other close relative, loss of a job, or moving to a new location, can have a higher incidence of death. People who are quick to anger or who display frequent hostility have an increased risk of heart disease.

Scientists at the International Centre for Health and Society, London Medical School studied more than 10,000 men and women between the ages of 35 to 55 and reported that an imbalance between personal efforts at work (over commitments) and rewards (poor promotion prospects) created a situation of low job control that was associated with more than two times the risk of coronary heart disease.

In a study of 292 women, ages 30-65 in Stockholm, Sweden, The American Journal of Public Health reported that marital stress caused a nearly 3 times likelihood of recurrence of coronary heart disease.

Killer Hormone

Emotional stress is a protective mechanism. When our ancestors walked over a rise and suddenly saw a saber-tooth tiger 40 yards away, a surge of the adrenaline hormone prepared them for either fight or flight as they considered their options. As stated earlier, there is also a surge of the killer hormone, cortisol.

But in modern times, saber-tooth tigers are far and few between. The fight or flight response is not always the appropriate reaction to everyday stressful situations. Today, the adrenaline and cortisol surge that accompanies stressful situations builds up and has a damaging effect on the body – and can lead to heart disease. Natural stress relief remedies such as Vitalife adaptogens, can help eliminate the damaging effects of stress.

