TEN Quick TIPS

1. **Monitor your stress.** Keep a journal of stressful events for at least two weeks.
2. **Avoid or cope.** Eliminate the stressful situations you can avoid, and learn how to cope with the ones you can't.
3. **Recognize the signs.** Get to know the physical warning signs of stress like dry mouth, cold hands, and rapid heart beat.
4. **Notice how you feel.** Get to know the emotional warning signs of stress such as feeling anxious or short-tempered.
5. **Stop and think** before you react.
6. **Don't catch other people's stress.** If someone is short-tempered with you - just remember - that's *their* stress not yours.
7. **Visualize yourself in your favorite vacation spot.** Put your feet up, close your eyes, and take a mini-vacation.
8. **Take a deep breath.** Nothing works faster than deep breathing for lowering stress.
9. **You control your reaction.** Stubbornly refuse to let yourself become upset.
10. **Walk away.** Sometimes it helps to simply walk away from a stressful situation, and come back to it later when you feel calmer.

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The STRESS Factor

Understanding the role of stress in high blood pressure and heart disease

What you need to know...

Your body has an amazing mechanism called The Fight or Flight Response. In the event of a physical emergency this response allows you to gear up in a matter of seconds to *fight* with super strength or *flee* with super speed.

Any time you find yourself in a *threatening* situation this response to stress kicks in. During an episode of fight or flight your heart beats rapidly, your blood pressure soars and your cholesterol levels go up. Your body is sending energy to the muscles and organs that will help you fight this attacker or flee to safety.

The fight or flight response was a real lifesaver for our prehistoric ancestors. They were able to use this response - whenever they needed it - to overpower an enemy or out run it. But today, the fight or flight response may have outlived its usefulness. Here is why:

Let's say you're home in bed about to go to sleep. Before turning out the light you watch a report about a rash of burglaries in your neighborhood on the eleven o'clock news. Later that same night you hear a loud crash in your living room.

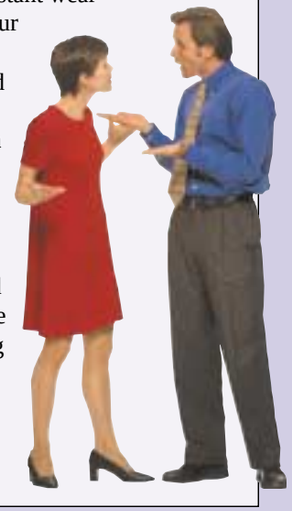
You leap out of bed. Even though you were resting soundly only seconds before, your heart is now pounding, your breathing is short and rapid and you can almost feel your blood pressure rising. As you stand listening at the bedroom door your mind is racing. You grab some kind of defensive weapon like a broom and go down stairs to investigate.

By the time you discover that your cat has knocked over a lamp in the living room your body has experienced a full blown version of the fight or flight response. Granted, if there really had been a burglary this response would have proven useful. **But how many times in your adult life have you had to *physically* defend yourself from an attacker?** Once, twice, not at all? And yet we turn on this high-octane response for inappropriate reasons like when a caller hangs up on us, or when a driver cuts us off on the highway or when our boss criticizes our work.

Any situation we *perceive* as threatening is enough to bring about this reaction. Occasional episodes of fight or flight are not a problem. Your body can handle these. But when you find yourself bothered by the smallest things, or you hold on to thoughts that upset you...guess what? Some of the bodily changes that happen *temporarily* during the fight or flight response don't go away when the event is over. And after enough false alarms your heart rate, blood pressure, and cholesterol levels all start to creep up - driven by levels of stress that have now become *chronic*.

Chronic stress is a silent killer. It causes arteriosclerosis (hardening of the arteries) by assaulting the inner lining of your blood vessels. Under the heightened pressure of fight or flight, these normally smooth inner linings begin to tear, scar, and pit. Blood rich with fatty acids, starches and glucose leave deposits in these worn areas which eventually clog up and harden.

Chronic stress can also cause hypertension (high blood pressure) and heart disease. Your body just can't take the constant wear and tear. It's like driving your car at sixty miles per hour with one foot on the gas and the other on the brake.



Luckily, there is a lot you can do about stress. This brochure will answer some of your questions about how stress affects your heart and blood pressure. It will demonstrate five techniques for lowering your stress. And hopefully, it will help you eliminate stress as a *risk factor* in your future health.

What you might ask...

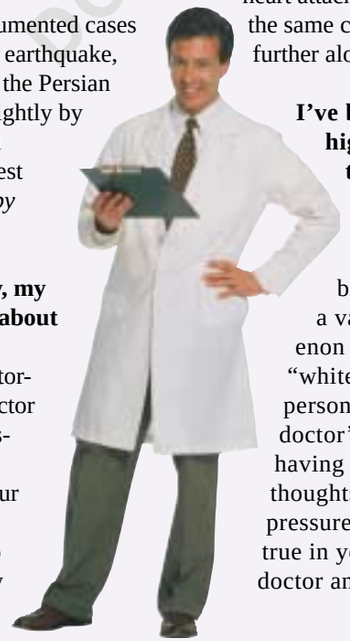
What is Type A behavior and what effect does it have on heart disease?
In the 1960's cardiologists Meyer Friedman and Ray Rosenman wondered if their cardiac patients (who were mostly men) shared any *behavioral* traits that might put them more at risk for heart disease. After years of careful research the doctors determined that impatience, competitiveness, and trouble dealing with hostility were just some of the many traits their patients shared. They named this behavior profile *The Type A Personality.* By the 1980's it was accepted as a risk factor in heart disease no less important than smoking, diet or exercise. But further research indicated that only one trait: *trouble dealing with hostility* seemed to be a real factor in heart disease. Therefore, Type A behavior is no longer considered a factor in heart disease but trouble dealing with hostility is.

Can a single stressful episode cause a heart attack?
Yes, it is rare but there have been documented cases of a stressful episode, such as a major earthquake, causing sudden cardiac death. During the Persian Gulf War, Israel was being attacked nightly by Scud missiles. More people died from stress-induced episodes of cardiac arrest *than from the physical injury caused by the missiles themselves.*

Other than telling me to take it easy, my cardiologist has barely said a word about stress. Why?
It takes a lot of time and careful monitoring to determine if stress really is a factor in a person's life. So it's almost impossible for your doctor, given the time constraints, to determine how high your level of stress really is. In addition, everyone handles stress differently, so the right amount of stress for you may be too much for someone else.

How can I determine my own stress levels, and what amount of stress is right for me?
There are lots of stress tests and even some simple biofeedback devices (available over the Internet and at biofeedback clinics) that can help you measure your stress levels. Determining the *right* amount of stress for you can be tricky. If you're a person who "doesn't sweat the small stuff" you may be able to tolerate the kind of hectic pace or busy working environment that would overwhelm a more sensitive person.

Is there such a thing as good stress?
Dr. Hans Selye, who coined the term stress, also invented the word *eustress* to describe stress which he believed was good for you. Eustress is anything new, interesting, challenging or exciting. Buying a new house, getting married, and winning the lottery are examples of stress that can be an uplift. But if you are just recovering from a recent heart attack, consider eustress and distress in the same category until your recovery is further along or you've consulted your doctor.



I've been told I have "border line high blood pressure," yet when I take my own blood pressure it seems to be within the normal range. Why?
Your blood pressure tends to be a bit higher in the doctor's office for a variety of reasons. This phenomenon is so common doctors call it "white coat hypertension." If you are a person who gets really nervous in the doctor's office, or are nervous about having your blood pressure taken, your thoughts can actually cause your blood pressure to rise. If you think this might be true in your case, discuss it with your doctor and see what he or she thinks.

What you can do...

The fight or flight response, which we described in the opening article, is your body's reaction to any situation you *perceive* as threatening. For the caveman (who used this response appropriately) it always included three stages: Stage I: *energy buildup;* that's when the caveman felt threatened. Stage II: *use of energy;* that's when he had to fight or flee. Stage III: *recovery;* that's when he would crawl into his cave and recover from total exhaustion. *Our* episodes of fight or flight almost never make it past stage I. That's what makes this response so harmful. All that energy is built-up inside your body with no place to go.

That's why exercise* is such a good antidote to stress. When you include a cool-down period afterward, exercise mimics stages II and III of the fight or flight response. It wipes away the energy built up during stressful episodes. After a good workout your body releases endorphins that help you relax even further.

Since stress is stored in your muscles as tension, **yoga, meditation, deep breathing, and progressive muscle relaxation also help you counteract the effects of the fight or flight response. Yoga** teaches you different body postures that stretch and relax muscles that are tight and tense. There are dozens of videotapes you can rent or buy, and classes that you can take at community centers like the Y.

Getting the book, *The Relaxation Response,* by Herbert Benson, M.D., is one of the best ways of learning **meditation.** In the book Benson outlines the four steps to achieving a meditative state: 1. A quiet place. 2. A word or phrase to focus on such as: *One* - or - *I am getting more and more relaxed.* (You repeat the word or phrase silently to yourself, over and over.) 3. A passive attitude. 4. A comfortable position. As simple as all this sounds - achieving a meditative state is not easy. It requires a unique blend of persistence, patience and practice.

Progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) is just one of dozens of relaxation techniques you can use to wipe away the effects of a stressful day. With PMR you tense and relax various muscle groups throughout your body, one by one. (*"Tense all the muscles in your shoulders...hold it for five seconds...and then relax. Now let's move on down to your lower back."*) There is a huge selection of relaxation tapes and CD's you can find at book stores and specialty shops. These tapes can produce measurable results in 10-15 minutes.

Deep breathing is so easy to understand you can learn it now. Place one hand over your belly. Breathe in deeply. If you can feel your hand rise as you breathe in and fall as you slowly breathe out - you've already learned the basics. S-l-o-w-l-y take 3 or 4 deep breaths in a row and you will feel the relaxing effects of this technique in less than a minute.

Change your thinking. There's one more way of counteracting the fight or flight response that might surprise you: *changing your thinking*. The next time you find yourself in a stressful situation you can choose not to participate. When you are stuck in traffic, being criticized by your boss, or arguing with your spouse simply ask yourself: Is this an emergency situation? Is it life-threatening? Does it require me to fight or take flight?

If the answer to any of these questions is no, then you must stubbornly refuse to let yourself get upset. This is hard to do at first, but you can *choose* not to participate in these situations that would normally upset you. *You can stop the Fight or Flight Response before it begins.* Do this and you'll be amazed how much stress you can avoid by simply changing your thinking.

*Consult your doctor before starting any exercise program.