

## SIX WAYS TO LOWER STRESS (AND DECREASE INFLAMMATION)

Lower stress levels mean lower levels of whole-body inflammation and higher levels of health. The first step to managing stress is to identify its source. Stress can be physical, emotional, or mental. It can be the result of illness, a packed schedule, lack of sleep, a poor diet, or any number of other challenges. Often, there is more than one factor underlying chronic symptoms of stress, so you need a holistic approach to managing it.

Symptoms of stress, regardless of the cause, can range from physical pain to mental foggy to extreme irritability. Stress also affects the immune system and depletes energy levels. Left unchecked, it can contribute to the development or exacerbation of disease as well.

The good news is there are many tools we can use to keep stress from getting the best of us. Here are six key ways to reduce the effects of stress on your body.

1. **Eat an anti-inflammatory diet.** Stress causes inflammation, so an anti-inflammatory diet is also a *stress-reducing diet*. Every food either increases or decreases inflammation to one extent or another, so it's important to learn which foods are anti-inflammatory, and which contribute to inflammation.
2. **Practice positive thinking.** Anxiety and stress are greatly affected by the kinds of thoughts we have. If you tend to be a worrier or a negative thinker, learn how to modify your thoughts. If this doesn't come easily, you may need a counselor's help, but there are also many perhaps self-help methods that can tune you into your thought patterns so that you can work on changing negative thinking patterns. It will take practice, but the payoff is worth the effort.
3. **Breathe!** There's a reason people tell us to "take a deep breath" when we seem stressed or anxious. When we're stressed, we tend to hold the breath, which raises blood pressure, causes muscles to clench, and stimulates a release of "fight or flight" endorphins. Taking slow, deep breaths will bring the body back into balance. This may be the simplest and most effective stress management tool in your arsenal!
4. **Practice yoga and meditation.** Yoga is more than a physical exercise, though the physical part is certainly a very effective way to lower stress levels. In addition to building physical strength and keeping blood flowing to your brain, yoga also offers techniques that can help you learn to breathe properly, which, as we just saw, is a powerful way to reduce stress. But yoga's most important stress-relieving benefit is meditation. In fact, the purpose of this ancient practice is actually to prepare the body for the stillness needed to meditate. When you're in a relaxed, meditative state, stress virtually disappears.
5. **Use herbal remedies or nutritional supplements.** Different nutrients affect your body and your stress response in different ways. Three nutrients that may help reduce stress are Vitamin B6, potassium and magnesium. Vitamin B6 is involved in the creation of serotonin, a

chemical that helps you feel good but can quickly become depleted when you're stressed. Potassium and magnesium are muscle relaxers. Certain herbs are said to help calm the body and curb the stress response as well. These include valerian, passion flower, chamomile, and lemon balm. Herbs can be taken in capsule form or as a tea.

- 6. Try aromatherapy using essential oils.** Aromatherapy works because the area of the brain that processes emotions also processes aromas. Essential oils that have calming effects include sandalwood, lavender, geranium, cedar, jasmine, and lemongrass. You can add the oils to bath water, use them in a diffuser, or even apply them directly on your skin. If you do use them on skin, check the label to be sure that the oil you've chosen is safe for topical use.

These simple methods for reducing stress are relatively easy to incorporate into anyone's lifestyle. You may find that you only need to use one or two of them to effectively deal with the stress in your life, or you may decide to try them all. The important thing is to get started and find a strategy that works for you because lowering your stress level may be the most important thing you do for your overall well-being.