

STRESS AND THE DIGESTIVE SYSTEM



The Science

- Have you ever felt nervous and experienced “butterflies” in your stomach? Or felt stressed and then felt nauseas? This is because the brain directly affects the stomach. The gut is the highest area of nerves outside of the brain and is sometimes called the “second brain.”
- The stress response inhibits the digestive system while the relaxation response activates it. That is why the relaxation response is often called “rest and digest.”
- When the stress response is activated, digestion is suppressed so the body can reroute its resources to trigger fight or flight. The central nervous system shuts down digestion by slowing contractions of digestive muscles and decreasing secretions for digestion.
- If the stress response happens occasionally, the body recovers and continues with normal functioning. If the stress response is triggered too often, the body has a harder time recovering. This impedes the flow of digestion and can cause stomach upset. It can also contribute to the development of irritable bowel syndrome and/or ulcers.
- The digestive system cannot function properly with too much stress or stimulation. Thus, we need to practice activating the relaxation response as often as we can.

Stress can cause:

- Acid reflux
- Bloating
- Butterflies
- Constipation
- Cramps
- Diarrhea
- Excess stomach acid
- Gas
- Heartburn
- Increase/decrease in appetite
- Indigestion
- Inflammation
- Nausea
- Stomach pain/discomfort

Stress plays a role in:

- Crohn's Disease
- Gastritis
- Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease (GERD)
- Infections
- Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)
- Ulcers



The Techniques

Here are some tips for learning how to manage stress and decrease symptoms affecting the digestive system:

- Exercise:** Exercise is one of the best things you can do to manage stress and maintain healthy digestion. It improves hormonal balance and stimulates the release of endorphins that improve mood and decrease stress.
- Breathing:** Hyperventilation and over breathing can cause excess air, leading to bloating, gas, pain and stomach discomfort. Relaxed breathing can stop this. Slow breathing also engages the body's relaxation response and lowers the stress response.
- Relaxation Therapy:** Relaxation techniques can be used to retrain your body's response to stress. You can do things such as yoga, tai chi, meditation, breathing exercises, gut-directed hypnosis, progressive muscle relaxation, or biofeedback.
- Diet:** Don't overeat. Avoid junk food, soft drinks, caffeine, and high amounts of fat and sugar. Relax and slow down when you eat. Drink plenty of water and eat fruits and vegetables.
- Keep a Daily Journal:** Keep track of what you eat and what your symptoms are to look for patterns. This may help you identify foods that irritate your stomach.
- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy:** This is often done as one-on-one training with a therapist for stress management skills and emotional regulation. It could also help you pinpoint psychological conditions contributing to GI stress.
- Perspective:** In many studies, subject's GI problems worsened when they had negative perceptions of stressful events. Before emotionally reacting to a situation, take a step back, breathe, and ask yourself how you can see the situation as an opportunity instead of a threat.
- Medical:** In some cases, you also may want to see a doctor to rule out other causes of intestinal discomfort, such as a virus, bacteria, lactose intolerance, allergies, acid reflux, or a more serious condition. A doctor or nutritionist may also have more information on fiber supplements or probiotics that can help regulate digestive health.