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DECEMBER 2014 : HOW STRESS AFFECTS CANCER RISK

How stress affects cancer risk

Chronic stress can have a big impact on your health.

BY MARKHAM HEID



Stress is a part of life. You feel it when you're preparing for the holidays, stuck in traffic or worrying about a friend's health. While a little stress is nothing to fret about, the kind of intense worry that lingers for weeks or months may make it hard for you to stay healthy.

"Stress has a profound impact on how your body's systems function," says Lorenzo Cohen, Ph.D., professor of General Oncology and Behavioral Science, and director of the Integrative Medicine Program at MD Anderson. Health experts are still sorting out whether stress actually causes cancer. Yet there's little doubt that it promotes the growth and spread of some forms of the disease. Put simply, "stress makes your body more hospitable to cancer," Cohen says.

Not all stress is equally harmful

There are two different types of stress, and only one seems to be really bad for your health, says Anil K. Sood, M.D., professor of Gynecologic Oncology and Reproductive Medicine at MD Anderson.

Short-term or acute stress, like the type you might feel before giving a speech or fighting holiday shopping crowds, tends to subside as soon as the event passes. "It's stress that comes from situations you know you can manage or will be over at some set time," Cohen says.

But long-term or chronic stress is more damaging. That type of stress springs from situations that last many weeks or months with no definite end point. "Caring for a sick loved one or dealing with a long stint of unemployment are common causes of chronic stress," Cohen says.

This type of no-end-in-sight stress can weaken your immune system, leaving you prone to diseases like cancer. It also ups your risk for digestive problems and depression. "Chronic stress also can help cancer grow and spread in a number of ways," Sood says.

Stress hormones can inhibit a process called anoikis, which kills diseased cells and prevents them from spreading, Sood says. Chronic stress also increases the production of certain growth factors that increase your blood supply. This can speed the development of cancerous tumors, he adds.

Find healthy ways to manage stress

What can you do about stress? Removing the cause is the clear answer. But that's not always possible when it comes to the types of things that cause chronic stress, Cohen says.

Even if you can't rid yourself of the source of your stress, you can [learn to manage it](#). This can help you keep a lid on chronic stress. It also can help you prevent minor sources of stress from lingering to a point where they're affecting your health. Below, Cohen shares stress-reducing strategies.

Talk to a professional

A psychiatrist or psychologist can teach you healthy ways to manage your stress.

Strategies may include talk therapy and cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). These can help your brain uncover the connections between your thoughts, emotions and behaviors. "CBT can provide you with mental tools to manage the types of worry and anxiety that screw up your immune system and increase your disease risks," Cohen says.

Practice meditation or yoga

Mindfulness meditation and yoga have been proven to combat stress. These movement-based activities give your mind a break from stress. They also can improve your mood and quality of life.

Aim for at least two 20-minute periods a day of meditation or similar relaxation techniques, Cohen says. That time shouldn't include stimulating activities like watching television. "Sit quietly and try to keep your mind off any concerns. Think about visiting your favorite vacation spot or a quiet, safe place like your garden."

Mediation and yoga also can help your brain soften the links between your thoughts, your emotions and unhealthy biological changes, he says. Put simply, these practices dampen your brain and body's reactions to stressful events.

Get adequate sleep

“Getting eight hours of sleep each night is a great defense against stress,” Cohen says. Why? [A full night of sleep](#) is essential to proper immune function. It also affects your mood, memory and ability to focus, [experts say](#). Sticking to a regular sleep schedule, avoiding TV in bed and exercising regularly can all help you sleep more soundly.

Take stress seriously

It’s important to understand the negative consequences of stress, especially when it comes to your cancer risks. “Chronic stress is not something anyone in our society should take lightly,” Cohen says.

If you feel crankier than usual, you don’t have the energy you once had or you’re sleeping poorly, all of those could be signs of stress, Cohen says. Take steps to fix your problem before it affects your health in more serious ways.

[Request an appointment at MD Anderson's Lyda Hill Cancer Prevention Center online](#) or call 855-708-8582.

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