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6 Signs stress is hindering your health



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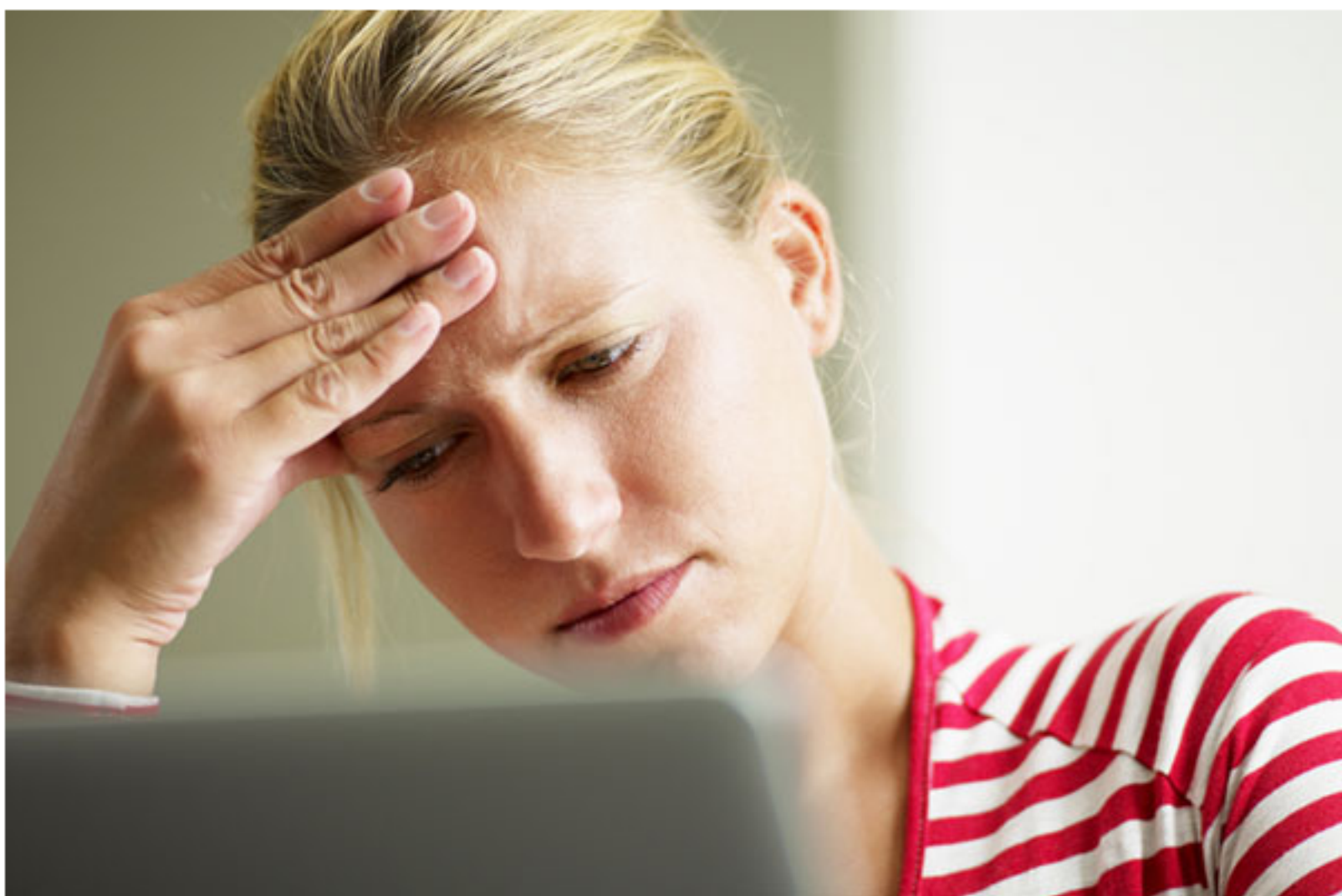
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STRESS AND YOUR HEALTH

A little bit of stress is normal for most people, but what happens when stress starts to interfere with your day-to-day life? If you're not sure whether what you're feeling is normal, we share a few signs that your stress level is hindering your health.



We asked Adam Gilbert, founder and chief body tutor of [MyBodyTutor.com](#), a site that helps users meet their health and fitness goals, about how to tell if stress is affecting your health.

1 You're gaining weight

When you feel stressed, your body assumes you're going to need physical energy to protect itself. "Our bodies combat with a shot of adrenaline, chased with a shot of cortisol," Gilbert explains. "This little duo tells your body you need to replenish the calories you've used. In other words, your body is telling you to eat." So the more stressed out you feel, the more likely you are to reach for a snack. Chances are, when you do reach for a snack when dealing with stress, what you reach for is likely high in calories, fat and sugar. Gilbert says there are biological reasons humans gravitate toward these foods in times of stress. "Sugary, salty, fatty foods release serotonin, a feel-good chemical in the brain. And although the piece of chocolate cake at the end of the day makes us feel better, it's only temporary."

2 You're in a bad mood

If you've been more irritable than usual lately, stress could be to blame. In particular, blame your amygdala, says Gilbert. "Stress response starts in the region of your brain called the amygdala. When it senses stress, it basically shuts down shop in your brain and prepares your body for survival," he explains. When the amygdala is placed under constant stress (you're always under tight deadlines, you're going through relationship issues), it can become overly sensitive. As a result, Gilbert notes, this starts to make even harmless events seem like real threats, which explains your irritability and desire to lash out at others.

3 You're feeling scatterbrained

While it's normal to be forgetful now and again, one sure sign stress is starting to take its toll is when you realize you're often forgetting things — *a lot* of things. "Excess stress causes the release of cortisol, a fun little stress hormone, into our system, and it turns out cortisol isn't our brain's best friend," Gilbert says. "In fact, research shows cortisol actually kills nerve cells and is linked to impaired memory function."

4 You're not sleeping

Sleep problems — whether you can't get to sleep, wake up frequently or can't sleep at all — are a significant indicator of stress. In fact, Gilbert notes, stress is the No. 1 cause of sleep deprivation and insomnia. "And once you're sleep deprived, your threshold for dealing with everyday problems is even lower, thus keeping you stressed out and making it more difficult to sleep the following night," he adds. "It's a vicious cycle. Bottom line: When your mind is aroused from the daytime anxieties, it makes it difficult to drift off to sleep."

5 You're getting sick

Dealing with a host of problems that are causing you to feel stressed? If you also feel like you're coming down with something (sniffling, sneezing, feeling generally ill), stress is likely to blame. "The mind and body are intrinsically related," says Gilbert. "The truth is, stress can dress up like all sorts of medical maladies. Stress suppresses the immune system and makes it easier for you to get sick."

6 Your digestion is out of whack

Stress can wreak havoc on many areas of the body, including the digestive system. That's because our brain's nervous system is linked to our guts, says Gilbert. So if you're stressed out, your stomach could give you trouble. "Mental stress can cause digestive problems by slowing the emptying of food from the stomach, and it can also cause the body to produce more digestive acid, which leads to heartburn," he explains.

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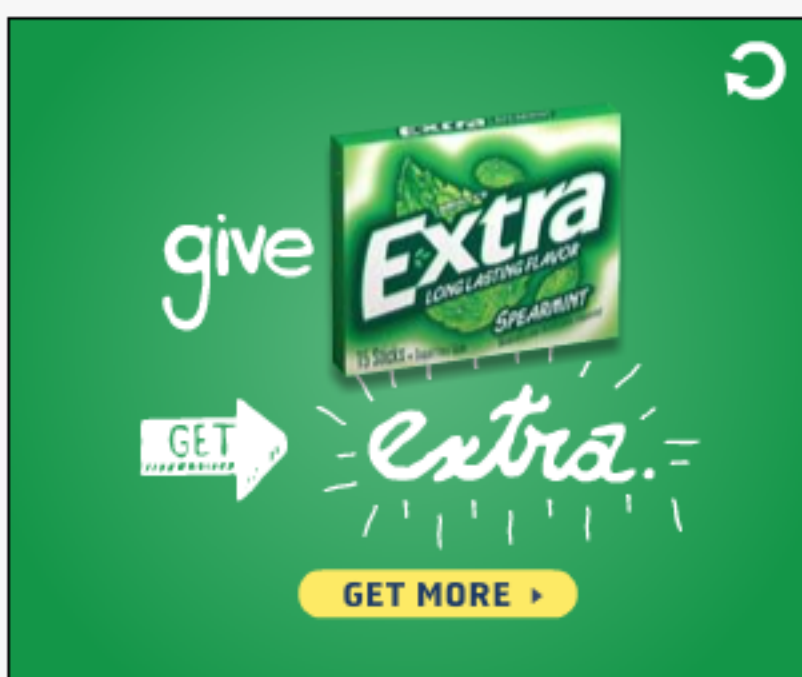
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