

Obesity and Chronic Stress

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Obesity, chronic stress, and poor sleep are all common and intertwined issues in modern society. Stress—defined as a real or perceived threat that can be physical, psychological or social in nature—has been identified as a factor that may contribute to the disease of obesity. Common sources of stress include relationship conflicts, work environment, financial struggles and lack of social support.

The body's stress response is known as "fight or flight." This physiologic response is critical to survival and has allowed us to adapt to our ever-changing environment. When this system is activated by different types of stress, it causes changes in heart rate, breathing, blood pressure and digestion. It also signals our body to increase the release of fat and sugar into our blood stream to provide immediate energy to critical organs. This response has been crucial to the survival of the human species, but if chronic stress is left unchecked, it can have a significant negative impact on our health.



Chronic, unmanaged stress often leads to hormonal changes that cause elevated blood sugars, insulin resistance, elevated cholesterol, high blood pressure and more. The release of stress hormones, such as cortisol, can also negatively affect a person's appetite, leading to a preference for foods that are high in fat, salt and sugar. Increased consumption of these foods (which are often highly processed) also appear to negatively affect brain activity involved in the processing of stress and anxiety. This, in turn, can lead to issues with insomnia, decreased motivation, and chronic fatigue.

While completely eliminating stress from our lives is not realistic, there are several ways to help reduce the negative effects that chronic stress can have on our health. Some examples include participating in regular physical activity, meditation or other relaxation techniques, getting more sleep, journaling, and counseling. Using a variety of these tools, even in small amounts, can significantly improve our health. At the New England Weight Management Institute, we strive to help our patients understand the relationship between weight, stress and overall health, and ultimately find realistic ways to decrease stress in their lives and reach their health goals.

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