



Holidays and Stress

(From an Article by Dr. Burstein Appearing in The Independent Press, Wednesday, December 16, 1992)

By Dr. Edward M. Burstein

From feasting at the Thanksgiving table to lighting the menorah or decking the halls, the holiday season is filled with activity, indulgence and... STRESS.

You shop to the point of exhaustion, you eat and drink at parties to have a good time, and you try to keep the peace at home when family tensions rise. You probably joke about how stressful your life is because you figure there's nothing you can do about it. But stress is no laughing matter and it can, in fact, lead to more complex health problems that can slow you down in the new year. Seriously then, what is stress and what can you do about it now before it's too late?

Stress is best characterized by physiological changes within the body - changes which are activated by the adrenal glands. Your adrenal glands are responsible for increased blood sugar that provides muscle energy and thinking power. They can increase heart rate and higher blood pressure to circulate energy - providing sugar and oxygen throughout your body. They can also increase respiration as well as other activities that give you physical energy and thinking ability. These physiological changes are known as defense responses which occur to help you handle problems and protect yourself against accidents and injury - in other words, survive.

"Eustress" (or good stress) is when these changes occur for a specific purpose - making a big presentation to the boss, asking someone out on a date, or responding to danger - and when the goal is accomplished the body returns to a relaxed state. "Distress" (or bad stress) is prolonged stress, in which the body stays in a constant state of alarm and cannot return to a relaxed state.

Dr. Hans Selye, an expert on stress and its consequences, has found that even the slightest strain on the body will put it in a stressed, or defensive, state. Doctors look at these strains, or stressors, in four basic groups: mental, physical, chemical and thermal.

Long-term mental stress or emotional anxiety is most harmful to the body if it is unrelenting and if there is no outlet for the energy that is created by your body's defense response. An unpleasant working environment, financial worries, the death of a loved one - all these can keep your body in defense physiology 24 hours a day, awake or asleep. Breathing exercises and meditation, a proper diet, and regular aerobic exercise can help relax your body, give it fuel and provide an outlet for pent-up energy.

Physical stress ranges from a lack of sleep to structural problems, such as a spinal imbalance or a pinched nerve. It is usually the easiest to detect and can be corrected with adequate rest and chiropractic care.

Chemical stress comes from pollution, contaminated and refined food, and medicine. A diet rich in refined sugar, salt, white flour, and hydrogenated and saturated fat - combined with the many preservatives, food colorings and artificial flavorings found in food items today - is extremely stressful to your body. Medicine, as well, may be stressful because it interferes with the body's natural defense mechanisms.



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Thermal stress occurs when the body becomes overheated or chilled. Usually thermal stress is short-term, since the body has a built-in thermostat to help it to adapt to its environment.

Nobody, and no body, can survive all of these factors working against the body at the same time. Become aware of where the stress is coming from in your life and do what you can to eliminate as much of it as you can. You will have a healthier, happier holiday.

Editor's note: Dr. Burstein is founder and Clinical Director of the Berkeley Heights Chiropractic Center, a multi-doctor holistic health care center dedicated to natural healing and optimum health. He has been awarded the status of Teaching Diplomate by the International College of Applied Kinesiology, and shares this distinction with only four other chiropractors in the state and 117 worldwide. Dr. Burstein has lectured at Overlook Hospital and Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital on immune, autoimmune and chronic degenerative diseases. For information, call (908) 665-0770.