

Sneaky Places Stress Shows Up

When pressure and anxiety mount, your body takes the hit—and not always in obvious ways. Watch for these strange signs that you're more frazzled than you realize.

By Jennifer Abbasi


You're stressed. We're stressed. Everyone's stressed. No big deal, right? Because it's so common, you might think that if you're not lying on the floor from exhaustion, you're probably fine. But stress has an insidious way of creeping up on you, and it's not just a mental or emotional issue—it can impact the body in some very visible (and bizarre) ways.

“One of the biggest problems I see in my practice is women coming in with multiple physical signs of stress,” says Nancy Molitor, Ph.D., a psychiatry

professor at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine. In fact, a new study found that stress and other negative emotions were consistently linked to poor physical health in more than 150,000 people in 142 countries. That's because the mind and body are intrinsically connected:

“Emotional stress alerts the body to produce stress chemicals such as cortisol, which—if produced on an ongoing basis—begin to break down the immune, gastrointestinal, neurological, and musculoskeletal systems,” says Molitor.

What's worse, those physical symptoms you end



Stomach under siege: Medicine only masks the real problem, stress.

Angsty people
lose more
than just sleep.

up with (um, bald patches) can bump up your emotional angst even more. If you don't break the cycle, you're left with an ugly feedback loop that increases your chances of serious issues such as obesity, depression, and heart disease.

The best ways to reduce your overall stress is to get enough sleep (seven to nine hours a night for most people), eat healthful food, exercise, reach out to supportive pals, and focus on things within your control. You can also learn to read your body and recognize the not-so-obvious signs that you're overstressed before it all snowballs into a long-term health condition. Keep an eye out for these red flags.

Stomachaches

The brain's nervous system is linked to the gut's, so mental stress can wreak havoc on your GI tract, says Bincy Abraham, M.D., a gastroenterologist at Baylor College of Medicine. Depending on your situation, your doctor may treat your tummy troubles with over-the-counter drugs (stool softeners), prescriptions (such as anti-nausea meds), or dietary changes (fiber can restore your gut's stress-ravaged helpful bacteria).

In the meantime, the best natural remedy for stress-caused constipation, diarrhea, nausea, or vomiting is... exercise. It may sound like

the last thing you want to do when your stomach is aching, but heading out for a run can boost endorphins that make the mind *and* gut feel better.

Hair Loss

Roughly three to six months after a majorly stressful event, like getting axed from a job or ending a big relationship, you might notice more hair on your brush or in the drain than usual (shedding around

100 strands a day is normal). Super-high levels of sex hormones called androgens, which zoom up during stress, could mess with hair follicles to prompt temporary hair loss, says Roberta Sengelmann, M.D., a dermatologist in Santa Barbara, California.

There's no one food or supplement that's proven to restore your locks, but eating a balanced diet can help cell growth and healing.

Eyelid Twitching

These annoying muscle spasms typically occur around one eye and last for a few minutes. Stress is one of their most common causes, though doctors aren't quite sure why.

When a twitch strikes, close your eyes, try to relax, and breathe deeply. Inhale for four seconds, hold your breath for seven seconds, then exhale for eight seconds. Repeat this four times while using a fingertip to put mild pressure on the lid that's twitching.

Over-the-counter artificial tears can also help ease the spasms, which dry eyes can exacerbate, says Anne Summers, M.D., of the American Academy of Ophthalmology. If the twitching spreads to other parts of your face, see a physician—it could be a more serious type of spasm.

Acne

Just like your hair, your skin is sensitive to those higher-than-normal androgens, which can bring on breakouts, says Sengelmann. Talk to your dermatologist if your zits keep coming back—the chronic inflammation can lead to scarring. (As hard as it is, resist the urge to pop the suckers, which only adds to the inflammation. And you're

Stress can short-circuit your immune system, causing dormant skin issues to act up.

Healthy Dose

more likely to end up with scarring when you're stressed and your body's ability to heal isn't at its peak.)

Oral and topical prescription meds, as well as certain soaps, can help unplug pores and wipe out the bacteria that cause acne. Your dermatologist might also suggest you go on birth control, or switch up what you're already on, to balance out your hormones. And be sure to stick to noncomedogenic (i.e., non-pore-clogging) makeup, moisturizers, and sunscreen.

Back Pain

The hormones your body pumps out when you're stressed produce a fight-or-flight response, which—along with raising your blood pressure

and heart rate—tightens up your muscles. "If you're trying to outrun a predator, that's good," says Joanne Borg-Stein, M.D., of Harvard's Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital. "But if it's all the time, that sort of chronic stress response can lead to pain." Plus, muscle aches are par for the course if you're hunched over at your desk all day worrying about deadlines.

Movement is the best remedy, so if your back is in knots, stand up every hour and do some stretches, such as reaching your arms over your head, touching your toes, and rolling your neck and shoulders. Also try to get in a 10- to 15-minute walk around the office or outside once or twice a day.

WH Online

Discover eight awesome stress-busting foods at WomensHealthMag.com/June.

Rashes

Stress can bring on mysterious rashes or flare-ups of preexisting conditions. That's because it can throw your immune system—not to mention your skin's defenses—out of whack. When these are lowered, you could become susceptible to rash-causing skin infections caused by staph. On the flip side, if your immunity goes into overdrive, your skin will become more sensitive, making a dormant issue like eczema act up.

In either case, bland emollients, including gentle OTC moisturizers, can help you heal. "If that doesn't help, or if the rash is accompanied by a fever or other flu-like symptoms—chills, sweating—see your doctor right away," advises Sengelmann. ■

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THE DOCTOR IS IN

Can I take OTC meds past their expiration date?

—Shannon, Boise, ID

Technically (and according to the FDA), there's no guarantee expired meds will be safe or effective. That said, they're way more likely to lose their potency than do harm. For example, ibuprofen that expired six months ago may or may not help with your head pounder, but it's not likely to make it worse. If you're in a bind and an out-of-date OTC med is your only option, it's worth a shot.

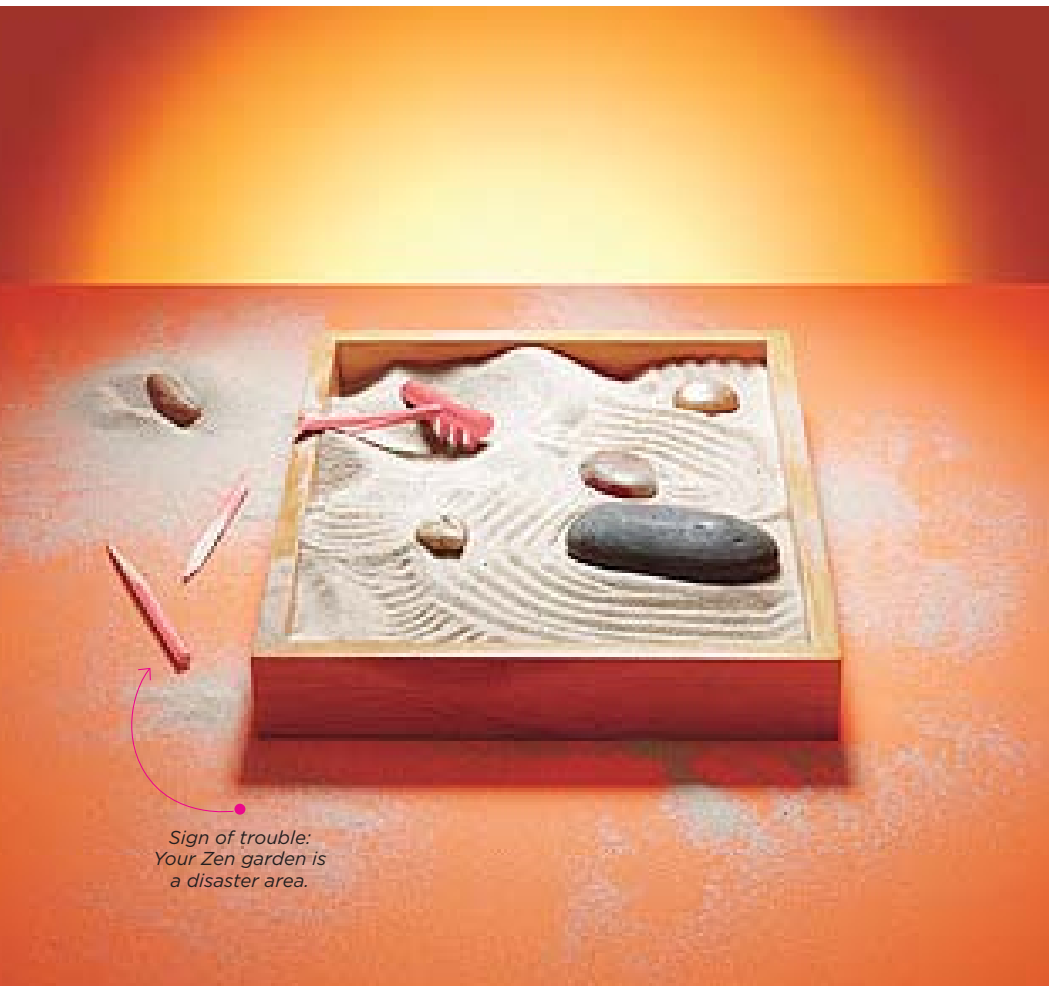
I always have to pee way more often than anyone else. Help!

—Anne, Bowling Green, KY

The main factor is pretty obvious: The more liquid you take in, the more often you'll need to heed nature's call (this is especially true if you guzzle lots of coffee or alcohol, both diuretics). If you aren't a super sipper but are always in the stall, you could just have a smaller bladder—they come in all shapes and sizes, and women's are typically smaller than men's. Or you might have a lower "emptying threshold." Some people feel the need to go before their tank is full; others are comfortable holding it longer. If, however, you suddenly experience pain or burning while urinating, see your doctor stat.

Keri Peterson, M.D.

Internal medicine, Lenox Hill Hospital, New York City. Go to WomensHealthMag.com/Experts to ask your questions.



Sign of trouble: Your Zen garden is a disaster area.