

No Rest From

STRESS

Are you experiencing weird physical symptoms you can't explain? It might be down to anxiety and stress

Life is stressful. Many of us are working longer, looking after children or grandchildren, as well as worrying about and caring for elderly relatives. In our attempts to soldier on, our stress levels are soaring.

And it's not only affecting us mentally, but physically too. 'Stress response systems communicate with the rest of the body,' says Anna Whittaker, Professor of Behavioural Medicine at the University of Birmingham. 'Overactivation and

eventually wear and tear means other bodily systems don't function as well. This can lead to reduced immunity and increases in resting blood pressure.' It can also be responsible for other symptoms you may not even realise are caused by stress.

THE STRESS TEST

Find out if you're suffering and what you can do to help

LOSING CONCENTRATION?

Ever walked into a room and forgotten what you went in for? Or realised you haven't heard most of the conversation you've just had with your partner, let alone be able to respond? 'Under conditions of

continual stress the impact of stress response systems on the brain mean that attention and processing become faulty. This can affect our concentration and decision making,' says Professor Whittaker.

LACKING LIBIDO?

Just spending time together

may help. 'Cortisol – one of the hormones produced by stress – is essential, but in small doses for short bursts of time,' says Dr Logan Levkoff, sexuality and relationship educator. If elevated levels of cortisol are being produced for prolonged periods, it suppresses sex hormones, which can lower our libido.

BLEEDING GUMS?

Stress increases inflammation in your body, which makes your gums more likely to bleed. It can also 'lead to poorer immune responses to infection,' says Professor Whittaker. A 2006 study, published in the *Journal of Periodontology*, found that women with stress-related depression had

ITCHY SKIN?

Chilling out might be more effective than changing your fabric conditioner at soothing prickly and irritated skin. This is because 'blood is diverted away from the skin to the vital organs where it is needed most when you are stressed,' says stress expert

and therapist Marion Tyler. 'This can exacerbate existing allergies and rashes.' And common skin conditions also become worse under stress.

A study of more than 2,000 people found that those with chronic itch were twice as likely to be stressed out as those without the condition.

higher levels of inflammation in the gums and increased levels of plaque build up. What's more, if you're stressed, everyday maintenance, such as brushing your teeth, can go by the wayside.

BRUISING MORE EASILY?

When you're stressed for long periods of time, your body goes into survival mode to

make sure you don't collapse under pressure. Blood moves away from the skin to your vital organs and also thickens so you don't bleed to death if a 'crisis' happens.

A chemical response also makes your skin more sensitive and reactive, so if you bump yourself, you bruise more easily. And because your body releases endorphins – your natural pain relievers – during times of stress

to protect itself, you probably won't even realise you've hurt yourself.

BAD SKIN?

Overproduction of cortisol brought on by stress can lead to further spots and even adult acne.

'Stress causes your body to make hormones, which tell glands in your skin to make more oil,' says dermatologist Margarita Lolis, MD. 'When we're anxious and in fight-or-flight mode, our adrenal glands, which are responsible for regulating stress, are in action mode. These adrenal glands stimulate sebaceous glands leading to more oil (sebum) production.'

ARE YOU TOO STRESSED?

Of course, stress not only affects you physically. The mental symptoms are well known. 'You may experience many different feelings, including anxiety, fear, anger and frustration,' says a spokesperson for mentalhealth.org.uk.

'When you're stressed you may behave differently. For example, you may become withdrawn, indecisive, inflexible, irritable or tearful. Even if you were previously mild-mannered, you may suddenly become verbally or physically aggressive.' These symptoms can over a period of time make you feel more anxious, in turn leading to depression.

Twelve million adults in the UK see their GP with mental health problems each year. Most suffer from anxiety and depression and much of this is stress-related. A staggering 13.3 million working days are lost per year due to stress, depression and anxiety.

STRESS-RELIEVING TIPS

Professor Anna Whittaker's advice

GET ENOUGH SLEEP

Going to bed and getting up at roughly the same time every day will programme your body to sleep better. Choose a time when you're likely to feel tired and sleepy and try to relax before you go to bed – have a warm bath, listen to quiet music and stay away from the phone and other screens for at least an hour. Make sure your bedroom is dark and between 16-19°C.

ENGAGE IN PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Walking will help to offset negative effects of stress and improve mood. NHS UK recommends at least two and half hours of moderate exercise,

such as cycling and brisk walking, per week.

EAT HEALTHILY

Avoid crashing blood-sugar levels by choosing foods that release energy slowly like wholemeal pasta, brown rice, oats, nuts and seeds, and eat little and often.

LIMIT ALCOHOL INTAKE

Aim for no more than 14 units a week to enable your body to function better and deal with stress.

TALK TO OTHERS

Don't try to deal with stress alone. If you don't want to speak to a family member or your doctor, there are several places you can get support online, including mind.org.uk and anxietyuk.org.uk.

Hi!