

HEALTHWISE

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Stressed Out? A Guide to Signs, Symptoms and Solutions

“I think that you will all agree that we are living in most interesting times. I never remember myself a time in which our history was so full, in which day by day brought us new objects of interest, and, let me say also, new objects for anxiety.”

Was the above heard: 1. At a recent town hall meeting in Florida? 2. On the 2016 campaign trail? 3. During an 1898 address by a British statesman?

It may surprise you to learn that number 3 is the correct answer, and provides a welcome bit of perspective on the stress felt by every generation. While current times are considered stressful by a majority of adults, we also have better ways to identify, manage and prevent it than before.

Did You Know?

60-80%

Percentage of visits to primary care physicians for stress-related conditions

Sources: APA, Mayo Clinic, Benson Henry Institute



Causes of stress

While stressors of American adults have remained fairly stable over the years, some are specific to the decade. As the American Psychological Association’s “2017 Stress in America” survey shows, the political climate and technology-centric world has caused an uptick in stress:

- ◆ **One nation, over stressed.** 57% of Americans report the political climate is a significant source of stress; 66% say the same about the nation’s future. Stress about acts of terrorism was high at 59%, while worries over personal safety rose to 34%, the highest since the question was first asked in 2008.
- ◆ **Money, money, money.** Other top causes of stress include money (61%), work (58%) and the economy (50%).

- ◆ **Media overload.** Although nearly all adults own at least one electronic device, and more than 86% check emails, text or social media accounts daily, those who do so constantly report higher stress levels.

How to cope

For decades, stress-related issues have been recognized as the leading cause of visits to a primary care physician. Stress-relieving techniques continue to evolve:

- ◆ **Eat, pray, love.** Exercise and going online are frequently used to manage stress. Women, however, also reported spending time with friends or family, reading, engaging in prayer or eating as their primary methods of relieving stress.
- ◆ **Unplug.** Interestingly, while 65% of Americans agree that periodically disconnecting is important

From the desk of
Northern Virginia Family Practice



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for mental health, only 21% actually report doing so. Some techniques that work include no cell phones at the dinner table or while with friends, periodic digital detoxes, watching less tv, and turning off notifications for social media apps.

- ◆ **Trigger your relaxation response.** Based on Dr. Herbert Benson’s 1974 discovery of an opposite state to the fight-or-flight response, the relaxation response puts the body in a state of deep rest. Techniques include mindful meditation, repetitive prayer, focused breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, tai chi and yoga. Studies have shown significant short-term impact on stress symptoms, as well as profound long-term improvements. Immediate reductions in blood pressure, heart and breathing rate helps manage periods of acute stress. If practiced regularly, the relaxation response can also help decrease inflammation and stress hormone levels and improve insulin activity and gastrointestinal issues.

Types of stress

◆ **Acute stress**, the most common form, is experienced by virtually everyone at some point. Arising from the pressures of current conditions, and anticipated ones in the near future, acute stress can be exciting, even motivating, but too much is simply exhausting.

Symptoms: Emotional distress, such as anger, irritability, anxiety or depression; muscular problems including tension headache, back or jaw pain; stomach and bowel problems; temporary elevation in blood pressure; rapid heartbeat; sweaty palms, heart palpitations; dizziness; shortness of breath.

Solutions: This stress is short-term and highly manageable. Techniques to slow your breathing and focus your attention, as well as walking outdoors or participating in sports, can all help dispel it.

◆ **Episodic acute stress** is a fact of life for those people who are always rushed, late and dealing with a plethora of self-inflicted demands and pressures. This category includes “Type A” personalities – aggressive, impatient, short-tempered. Another type of person who feels episodic acute stress is the worrier – those with a pessimistic world view and a tendency to catastrophize every situation; likely to also feel anxious and depressed.

Symptoms: Persistent tension headaches, insomnia, migraines, hypertension, chest pain and heart disease.

Solutions: Lifestyle changes, such as daily physical exercise, meditation and mindful prayer, as well as expanding social support, can help. Additionally, consider consulting with a psychologist or other mental health professional, who can offer a range of treatment, from pharmaceutical to biofeedback. For example, insomnia, a considerable source of stress in adults, can be remedied with cognitive behavioral therapy, CBT-I, a structured program to help replace negative or obsessive thoughts that keep you up at night with habits that promote sound sleep. Unlike sleeping pills, CBT-I helps you overcome the underlying causes of your sleep problems.

◆ **Chronic stress** wears people down on a daily basis, often for years. Whether the cause is a dysfunctional family situation a bad career fit, people suffering from chronic stress often can’t see a way out.

Symptoms: Anxiety, insomnia, muscle pain, high blood pressure, weakened immune system; can contribute to the development of heart disease, depression and obesity.

Solutions: The most effective strategy is to seek help from professionals who can help you develop and implement lifestyle and behavior changes, recommend therapy, and prescribe medication when needed.



Hepatitis C Testing Recommended for All Baby Boomers

It's called 'the forgotten virus,' but after a sustained advertising campaign and years of strong recommendations for testing by the Centers for Disease Control it's almost certain that the liver-damaging Hepatitis C will be remembered...and for good reason. All people born between 1945 and 1965 – the Baby Boomer years – are now advised to take a screening test for Hepatitis C virus, the most common bloodborne infection in the United States. The reason? Boomers, born in a time before universal precautions and infection control guidelines were fully established, are five times more likely to have Hepatitis C than other adults, but not likely to be aware of it, as symptoms lay dormant for years. Testing was first recommended for all Boomers in 2013, but less than 15 percent of this at-risk generation have heeded the advice, which means many who are infected remain unaware they carry a potentially fatal but very curable virus.

Below we dispel some of the misperceptions and the breakthrough treatments available today. Most importantly, we explain why scheduling a blood screening is a vital act of prevention, and one we encourage every Baby Boomer to take.

What is hepatitis C?

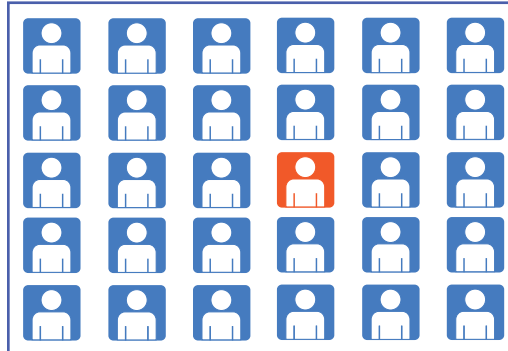
The common, chronic bloodborne infection known as hepatitis C is caused by the hepatitis C virus, and is a major cause of liver disease.

How does it happen?

The virus causes an inflammation that triggers a slow cascade of damage in the liver, with hard strands of scar tissue replacing healthy liver cells. The liver is no longer able to effectively filter toxins or make the proteins the body needs to repair itself.

Why is testing critical?

Hepatitis C can hide in the body for decades without



One in 30 – For every 30 individuals tested who were born between 1945 and 1965, one will test positive for hepatitis C

Did You Know?

80% – Of the 3.2 million people affected by chronic hepatitis C, almost 80% were born during the baby boomer generation

10.5 million – Out of 76.2 million Baby Boomers, the number who have been tested for hepatitis C

Sources: American Journal of Preventive Medicine, Centers for Disease Control

causing symptoms, while it attacks the liver. Since most people don't have warning signs of hepatitis C, they don't seek treatment until many years later, when the damage often is well underway. Left untreated, hepatitis C can result in cirrhosis or liver cancer, and is the leading indication for liver transplant in the U.S. If treated, however, the vast majority of patients can be cured within a few months.

Why are Baby Boomers at particularly high risk for hepatitis C?

Once thought of as a disease primarily of drug users, contracted from sharing of needles, hepatitis C can

also be contracted through inadequate sterilization of medical equipment and the transfusion of untested blood. Boomers grew up before the hepatitis C virus was identified in 1979, so it's likely that many became infected through medical equipment or procedures before universal precautions and improved infection control techniques were adopted. Others may have been infected from contaminated blood before widespread screening nearly eliminated the virus from the blood supply by 1992.

What is the test for Hepatitis C?

A simple blood test for hepatitis C antibodies will indicate if you've been exposed to the virus at some point in your life. If you test positive, further testing will be done to determine if the virus remains in your body, how much is circulating and what specific strain or genotype you have. At least six strains of hepatitis C exist and treatment is based on the specific genotype. Other tests, including ultrasound, magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) and a liver biopsy can be performed to identify inflammation and see if any permanent scarring has taken place in the liver.

What treatments are available?

Today's regimens of direct acting oral antivirals stop the virus from reproducing and clear hepatitis C from the body in a matter of weeks. These breakthrough drugs, first made available in 2013, represent a tremendous step forward in treatment, with a success rate upwards of 95% in those infected with the hepatitis C virus. Medication is targeted to the specific genotype of the virus, and most patients experience few side effects – a vast improvement over previous options of pegylated interferon and ribavirin which caused uncomfortable side effects and were effective less than half the time.

Sweet Surrender: Is Sugar Off the Table for Healthy Eaters?

As we become more aware of what comprises healthy eating, sugar is increasingly viewed with a wary eye. Evidence is mounting that a sugar-filled diet – *and the resulting weight gain* – can lead to increased cholesterol, blood pressure and inflammation, and to a higher risk of obesity and obesity-related conditions such as diabetes, pre-diabetes, cancer and cardiovascular disease (CVD). The key to prevention is understanding exactly what sugars you're eating.

Naturally occurring sugars are found in foods such as fruit (fructose) and milk (lactose). Any product that contains milk, such as yogurt or cream, or fresh or dried fruit contains some natural sugars. These can be eaten freely.

Added sugars hide in 74 percent of packaged foods, even those that many consider healthy, such as energy bars. They also lurk in savory foods, including ketchup, breads, salad dressing and pasta sauce. The top five sources are sugar-sweetened beverages (soda, specialty coffees, sports drinks); grain-based sweets (cookies, cakes, pies); fruit drinks (juice cocktails, punch); dairy-based desserts (ice cream, frozen yogurt); and candy (lollipops, jelly beans). These should be limited.

"Consider the company the sugar keeps. If it's accompanied by a nutritional element, it is not a contributor to disease," advises Jennifer McDaniel, Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics spokesperson. For example, fruit contains fructose, but also fiber, which ensures the natural sugar is absorbed in a slow and controlled manner; the same applies to the



protein in plain yogurt.

Guidelines for maximum daily amount of added sugars vary as follows:

- ◆ US Department of Health and Human Services: no more than 10% of total calories
- ◆ World Health Organization: encourages no more than 5%
- ◆ American Heart Association: no more than 6 teaspoons for women or 9 for men

While a complete sugar detox is not recommended – there is little evidence that it improves health or spurs weight loss – cutting back on added sugars to make room for healthier calories is strongly advised. McDaniel suggests:

- ◆ Look for the biggest offenders of added sugars in your diet, whether it's chocolate or soft drinks, and replace them with something you look forward to eating.
- ◆ Make a super food swap. Enjoy a sweet bedtime snack? Consider blending a frozen banana with

a splash of milk and unsweetened cocoa powder.

- ◆ Know your sweet tooth personality. If you're an all or nothing person, it may be easier to eliminate your sweet triggers permanently, but if you can handle eating a square of chocolate without needing the whole bar, permit yourself the treat.
- ◆ Try the 'Plain Jane' version. When you're in charge of the sweetness factor, you'll almost always use less than presweetened version, so buy plain oats and add your own fruit and honey.

Can sugar be part of a healthy diet? Thankfully, yes. "It's all about balance. The majority of our diet should be foods that nourish us, but there's certainly a place for the sweet treats in life," says McDaniel.

Sweet Disguise

It can be difficult to discern if a product contains both added and natural sugars, because the nutrition fact panels of food products don't distinguish between them. That's set to change in 2018 when federal regulations mandate the break out of added sugars. For now, be on the lookout for sugar in one of its many guises:

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|------------------------------|----------------|-----------------|
| ◆ Corn sweetener | ◆ Honey | ◆ Muscovado |
| ◆ Corn, malt or maple syrups | ◆ Molasses | ◆ Turbinado |
| ◆ Fruit juice concentrates | ◆ Agave nectar | ◆ Sweet Sorghum |
| | ◆ Barley malt | ◆ Treacle |
| | ◆ Cane juice | |
| | ◆ Caramel | |