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*"treating the cause of your problem, not just the symptoms"*

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## High Stress Equals Poor Health

People are in such a rush these days, living in the fast track. Did you know that you will probably make more appointments, meet more people, and go more places this year than your grandparents did in their entire lives? All this rushing around creates a life of stress.

From headaches, neck stiffness, to heart disease, stress is indicated as a factor in many illnesses. Stress may aggravate an existing health problem. Or, stress may trigger an illness if you're at risk for the condition.

Situations that create stress are as unique as you are. Your personality, genetics and personal experiences influence how you deal with stressors. For you, a big family dinner may be stressful. Other people might enjoy the increased activity and responsibility but find stress in situations that are beyond their control, such as the up and down relationship with their teenage child. Adults commonly list top stressors as family, finances and work. Older adults often feel social isolation is their biggest source of stress.

Here are just a few of the problems that excessive stress can cause:

**Neck & Upper Back Pain** – In my practice, it is not difficult to determine which patients are under excessive stress. The muscles in their neck and shoulders are generally very tight. If this is present for more than a week or two, the joints in the neck can become stiff and sore as well.

**Headaches** – Most patients who are under excessive stress also experience sporadic to constant “tension-type headaches. This is a result of painful muscle knots and irritated nerves referring dull achy pain to the forehead, eyes, temples, and back of the head.

**Non-restorative Sleep Patterns** – Whenever a person has a stiff and sore neck, their ability to sleep comfortably is reduced. They wake up regularly and cannot sleep for prolonged periods of time before getting stiff.

**Weakened Immune System** – A hormone called “cortisol” is produced by your body that stimulates or strengthens your immune. During stressful times, too much of this hormone

is produced and, in response, your body will shut down any further production of it. This leads to a suppression or weakening of your immune system and increases your susceptibility to infectious diseases. This is why people who are under a lot of stress are more prone to upper respiratory viral infections, such as a cold or flu.

Cardiovascular disease - Under acute stress, your heart beats quickly and works much harder than it should normally. If you already have some heart problems, stress will make you more susceptible to angina (a type of chest pain) and heart rhythm irregularities.  
Asthma - If you have asthma, a stressful situation can make your airways over-reactive and precipitate an attack.

Gastrointestinal Problems - Stress can make your symptoms worse if you have a gastrointestinal disorder such as an ulcer or irritable bowel syndrome.

Generally, stress is what you feel when the demands on your life exceed your ability to meet those demands. The stressor may be external, such as the death of someone close to you, pressures at work, or a sudden change in activity level. Or, it may be an internal stressor such as an illness. Regardless of what the source is, the level of your stress must be managed or your overall health will inevitably be affected. Next week, we will discuss a few tips on how to manage and deal with your stress.