

Diabetes Prevention Strategy



Stress Management

Stress is a normal part of life, but chronic stress can have a negative impact on your metabolic health. Understanding how stress affects your body can help you take steps to manage it before it starts working against you.



How it works

When you feel stressed, your body activates its "fight or flight" response. This triggers the release of hormones like cortisol and adrenaline, which raise your blood sugar to give you a quick burst of energy. In short bursts, this is helpful. **But when stress is ongoing, whether from work, finances, relationships, caregiving, or health worries, your body stays in this heightened state. Cortisol (stress hormone) levels remain elevated, and your blood sugar stays higher than it should.**

Chronic high cortisol levels can lead to insulin resistance, just like poor sleep or a diet high in processed foods. Insulin resistance causes your cells to stop responding to insulin as well, and blood sugar builds up in your bloodstream. This makes it harder to manage your weight, increases the inflammation in your body, and raises your risk of developing type 2 diabetes.

Stress also affects your health indirectly. When you're stressed, you're more likely to skip meals or reach for comfort foods, sleep poorly, move less, and have a harder time sticking with healthy habits. When these behaviors become habits, they can create a cycle that's hard to break without the right support.

There are two important categories to think about when it comes to stress and metabolic health:

Acute stress

Short-term, situational stress

This is the kind of stress you feel before a deadline, during an argument, or when dealing with an unexpected problem. Your body rebounds quickly once the stressor passes. **Occasional acute stress is normal and generally not harmful to your metabolic health.**

Chronic stress

Ongoing, persistent stress

This is the kind that lingers for weeks, months, or longer. It might come from financial strain, a difficult job, a chronic illness, grief, or caregiving responsibilities. **Chronic stress keeps cortisol elevated and is the type most strongly linked to insulin resistance, weight gain (especially around the midsection), and increased diabetes risk.**

How stress management improves your metabolic health



Lowers cortisol (stress hormones) and blood sugar: Managing stress helps bring cortisol levels back to a healthier range, which allows your body to process blood sugar more efficiently and improves insulin sensitivity.



Reduces inflammation: Chronic stress drives up inflammation throughout the body, which plays a role in insulin resistance and heart disease. Lowering stress helps calm that inflammatory response.



Supports healthier habits: When stress feels more manageable, it's easier to make better food choices, stay active, and sleep well. Stress management doesn't replace those other habits; it makes them more achievable.



Helps with weight management: High cortisol promotes fat storage, particularly around the abdomen. Reducing chronic stress can make it easier to lose weight and keep it off.

There are many ways to manage stress.

Eliminating stress from your life completely is not realistic. **The goal is to build habits that help your body recover from stress more effectively. Here are some approaches with strong evidence behind them:**

Mindfulness and deep breathing. Even 5 to 10 minutes a day of focused breathing or meditation can lower cortisol levels and improve blood sugar control. Apps like Calm, HeadSpace or Insight Timer can help you get started.

Physical activity. Movement is one of the most effective stress relievers. It doesn't have to be intense. A daily walk, stretching, or yoga can significantly reduce stress hormones and improve insulin sensitivity at the same time.

Social connection. Spending time with people you trust, whether friends, family, or a support group, helps buffer the effects of stress on your body. Isolation tends to make stress worse.

Sleep. Stress and sleep have a two-way relationship. Poor sleep increases stress, and high stress makes it harder to sleep. Improving one often helps the other.

Setting boundaries. Sometimes managing stress means saying no, asking for help, or stepping back from commitments that are draining you. Small changes in how you manage your time and energy can have a big impact over time.

Professional support. If stress feels overwhelming or you're experiencing symptoms of anxiety or depression, talking to a counselor or therapist can make a meaningful difference. Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is a form of therapy that helps you change your thought patterns and everyday behaviors to give you the tools to recover from stress more effectively.

You don't have to do everything at once. Pick one or two strategies that feel realistic and build from there. Even small, consistent changes in how you manage stress can improve your blood sugar, sleep, and overall health.