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The Stress Connection

Stress: we all hear about it and all think we have it. But what exactly is stress and how can we better cope with it? Stress is a physiological response of the body to any demand being placed upon it at any given time. The body responds to physical and emotional stress by producing adrenal hormones. These hormones are released into the blood and prepare the body for combating perceived dangers by increasing blood pressure, heart rate and by making more energy available for fuel. This is useful when physical action is necessary to escape danger, but in today's world, there is little physical outlet for these stressors.

The body then turns the response inward, affecting organ systems such as digestive, nervous or circulatory. When this happens conditions such as ulcers, hyperthyroidism, backache, atherosclerosis, allergies, asthma, fatigue and insomnia can develop. Because stress can be so dangerous and debilitating, it's important for us to learn how to deal effectively with it as it occurs, and ideally, prevent or reduce its occurrence in the first place.

Many of the disorders related to stress are not a direct result of stress itself, but are a result of nutrient deficiencies and increased by-products produced at the time of stress. A nutrient dense diet is essential during times of stress because stress increases metabolism and therefore will increase nutrient requirements. This diet will help to reduce the stress on the adrenal glands and minimize exhaustion. Hence, increase high potassium foods such as fish, avocado, potatoes, tomatoes and bananas. Increase water intake and consumption of whole grains, nuts, seeds, fresh fruit and vegetables. Reduce consuming simple carbohydrates, processed and refined foods and high salt content foods. Most importantly, avoid stimulants such as caffeine, alcohol and tobacco.

Exercising is crucial as it increases nutrient transport to all tissues, increases endurance and energy levels, reduces secretions from the adrenal glands, and helps to breakdown excess hormones. Aim to exercise 30 to 40 minutes three to four times a week.

Relaxation exercises "turns down" the adrenaline response and reduces overall nutrient needs. It simply brings the body back to parasympathetic (relaxation) mode where we can better digest our foods, sleep better and be rested. It is also important to relax before eating by taking 3 deep breaths before you eat. This will help to improve digestion and relax the adrenal glands.

Above all else, have fun. Find activities that you enjoy doing and people you enjoy being with and make them a regular part of your routine. Your Naturopathic Doctor will discuss a nutrient supplementation program with you that is best suited to your needs. There are also a number of lifestyle changes that will help you to deal with the effects of stress.