

The HG Cardiowise Digest

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Stress has become one of the most commonly blamed causes of heart disease. “My work is stressful.” “My family life is stressful.” “I’m anxious all the time.” Patients often ask me a simple question: “Doctor, is stress damaging my heart?”

The answer is both simpler—and more nuanced—than most people expect. Not every stressful day harms the heart. Life naturally comes with deadlines, responsibilities, and emotional ups and downs. The real concern is when the body never truly returns to a state of recovery.

In this edition, we explore what chronic stress actually does inside the body, how it influences blood pressure, sleep, metabolism, and heart rhythm, and—most importantly—what science tells us genuinely helps. Because protecting your heart is not about eliminating stress. It is about learning how to recover from it.

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Stress Isn't the Enemy. Lack of Recovery Is.

Most of us think stress is something we should avoid. Unfortunately, that is impossible. Stress is part of being human. Your heart actually needs brief periods of stress. Exercise is stress. Learning something new is stress. Public speaking is stress. Even excitement before a holiday increases stress hormones. Yet none of these are inherently harmful. The human body evolved to handle short bursts of challenge remarkably well. The problem begins when the challenge never truly ends.

Your Body Has Two Modes

Imagine driving a car. Sometimes you need the accelerator. Sometimes you need the brakes. Your nervous system works in much the same way. One half—the sympathetic nervous system—prepares you for action. Heart rate rises. Blood pressure increases. Breathing becomes faster. Energy is mobilized. This is often called the “fight-or-flight” response.

The other half—the parasympathetic nervous system—acts like the brakes. Heart rate slows. Blood pressure falls. Digestion improves. Repair begins. A healthy heart doesn't spend all day in one mode. It moves smoothly between the two.

When Stress Becomes Chronic

The problem isn't having stressful days. The problem is living as though every day is an emergency. Emails never stop. Phones never stop. News never stops. Many people remain mentally “on duty” from the moment they wake until they finally fall asleep. The body responds exactly as it was designed to. Cortisol stays elevated. Adrenaline remains active. Blood pressure rises. Heart rate stays higher. Sleep becomes lighter. Recovery becomes shorter. Over months and years, this constant biological activation quietly begins to influence cardiovascular health.

The Hidden Cascade

Chronic stress rarely causes heart disease through one single pathway. Instead, it quietly nudges many systems in the wrong direction. Blood pressure becomes harder to control. Sleep quality worsens. Food cravings increase. Exercise becomes less consistent. Weight gradually increases. Inflammation rises. Blood sugar regulation becomes less efficient. Each individual change may appear small. Together, they begin to shape long-term cardiovascular risk. Stress is rarely the entire problem. But it often amplifies every other risk factor.



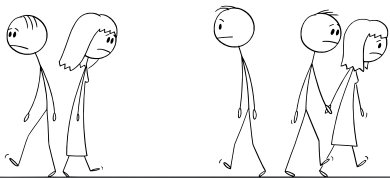
Stress Isn't the Enemy. Lack of Recovery Is.

Can Stress Cause a Heart Attack?

Patients often ask this after hearing stories of someone suffering a heart attack following a major emotional event. The answer is yes—but only in specific situations. Severe emotional stress can occasionally trigger a heart attack in someone who already has vulnerable coronary plaques. It can also lead to a temporary condition called Takotsubo (Stress) Cardiomyopathy, where intense emotional or physical stress suddenly weakens the heart muscle. Fortunately, these situations are uncommon. For most people, the greater danger is not one dramatic stressful event. It is years of poor recovery.

The Real Takeaway

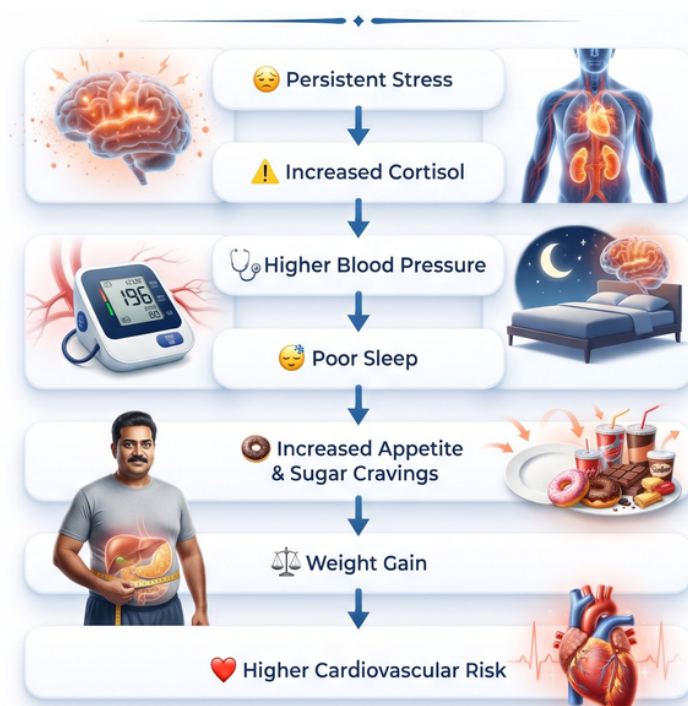
Modern life will probably never become less demanding. But your biology still follows ancient rules. Stress is inevitable. Recovery is intentional. And every day you create space for recovery, you give your heart another opportunity to repair itself.



“Stress is not measured by how busy your life is. It is measured by how little time your body gets to recover.”

Recovery Is a Biological Process

The goal is not a stress-free life. No such life exists. The goal is creating enough moments each day where your nervous system can safely return to recovery mode. That recovery might come from: A quiet evening walk. Good sleep. Meaningful conversations. Time outdoors. Prayer or meditation. Music. Slow breathing. Laughter. Different people recover differently. The biology is remarkably similar. Your heart simply needs regular opportunities to switch off the accelerator.



Can Stress Really Raise Blood Pressure?

Yes—but not always in the way people imagine. Acute stress can temporarily raise blood pressure through activation of the sympathetic nervous system. In healthy individuals, blood pressure usually returns to normal once the stressful event has passed. The concern is when stress becomes chronic. Repeated activation of stress pathways may contribute to persistently higher blood pressure, especially when combined with poor sleep, weight gain, physical inactivity, and excess alcohol. Stress may not be the only cause of hypertension—but it often makes blood pressure harder to control.

RELATED VIDEO

Stress and High BP: How Your Mind Hijacks Your Heart

▶ Watch on YouTube (HG Cardiowise)



Understanding stress is the first step. Learning how to recover from it is what protects your heart.”

THE HG 5R RECOVERY FRAMEWORK

Five Daily Habits That Help Your Heart Recover

Stress is unavoidable. Recovery is a choice. Your heart doesn't need a stress-free life—it needs regular opportunities to switch from “fight-or-flight” into “rest-and-repair.” Think of these five habits as your daily prescription for cardiovascular recovery.

😴 R1 – REST

Prioritize Sleep

Goal: 7–9 hours of good-quality sleep with a consistent schedule.

Why it matters:

During sleep, heart rate slows, blood pressure naturally dips, stress hormones fall, and your cardiovascular system enters its most important repair phase.



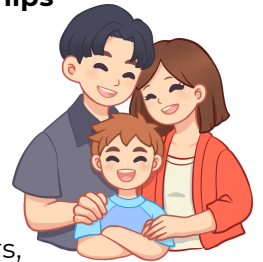
❤️ R4 – RECONNECT

Invest in Meaningful Relationships

Goal: Share genuine time with family or friends every day.

Why it matters:

Supportive relationships are consistently associated with lower stress, healthier behaviours, and better long-term cardiovascular health.



🏃 R2 – RUN (Move)

Move Every Day

Goal: About 30 minutes of moderate activity on most days.

Why it matters:

Regular movement doesn't just strengthen the heart—it lowers baseline stress hormones, improves mood, and builds resilience to future stress.



📵 R5 – RECHARGE

Disconnect to Recover

Goal: Create at least one period each day away from work, notifications, and constant stimulation.

Ideas include:

- ✓ Walking outdoors
- ✓ Reading
- ✓ Listening to music
- ✓ Gardening
- ✓ A hobby you genuinely enjoy



🫁 R3 – RESET

Calm Your Nervous System

Goal: 5–10 minutes of intentional relaxation daily.

Choose one:

- ✓ Slow breathing
- ✓ Meditation
- ✓ Prayer
- ✓ Mindfulness
- ✓ Quiet reflection

Why it matters:

Even a few minutes of deliberate relaxation activates your parasympathetic (“rest-and-digest”) nervous system, helping lower heart rate and blood pressure.



📋 THE DAILY 5R CHECK

- ✓ REST – Did I sleep well?
- ✓ RUN – Did I move today?
- ✓ RESET – Did I intentionally calm my mind?
- ✓ RECONNECT – Did I spend meaningful time with someone?
- ✓ RECHARGE – Did I disconnect from work or screens?

Don't aim for perfection.
Aim for four out of five most days.

Q Doctor, I've been under a lot of stress lately. How do I know if it's actually affecting my heart—or if I'm just worrying too much?

A This is a question I hear very often in my clinic, and it's an important one. Stress doesn't usually leave behind a single sign that says, "Your heart is under stress." Instead, it tends to influence several systems in the body at the same time. Rather than asking, "Is stress damaging my heart?" I encourage patients to ask a slightly different question: "Has stress started changing my body's normal patterns?" Some clues include:

- ✓ Blood pressure becoming more difficult to control
- ✓ Poor or fragmented sleep
- ✓ Frequent palpitations or a persistently higher resting heart rate
- ✓ Emotional eating or gradual weight gain
- ✓ Skipping exercise because of constant fatigue or lack of motivation
- ✓ Feeling mentally exhausted despite adequate physical rest



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DOCTOR'S PICK

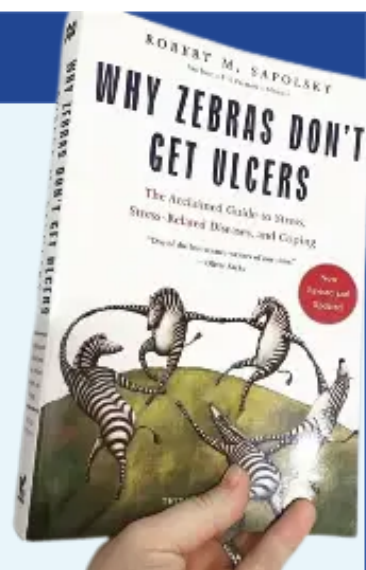
Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers - Robert M. Sapolsky

If I had to recommend just one book to understand the biology of stress, this would be high on my list. Neuroscientist **Robert Sapolsky** explains a fascinating paradox: **zebras experience intense stress—but only briefly.** Once the lion leaves, their stress response switches off. Humans, however, have the unique ability to keep the same stress response activated for hours, days, or even years—simply through our thoughts, worries, and anticipation. The book combines outstanding science with humour and remarkable storytelling to explain how chronic stress influences nearly every organ system, including the heart.

You'll Better Understand:

- ✓ Why cortisol is essential—but harmful when chronically elevated
- ✓ The difference between acute stress and chronic stress
- ✓ How stress affects blood pressure, sleep, immunity, metabolism, and cardiovascular health
- ✓ Why recovery is just as important as resilience

Although written for the general public, it remains one of the most respected books on stress biology and is grounded in decades of scientific research. Whether you're a healthcare professional or simply curious about how your body responds to stress, this is a book you'll love.



FREE QUICK GUIDE

Better Recovery for a Healthier Heart Includes

- ✓ Daily Stress Reset Checklist
- ✓ 5-Minute Breathing Routine
- ✓ Evening Digital Detox Planner
- ✓ Recovery Habit Tracker

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