

UPDATE ON COVID-19 July 2020

By

Mark N. Monroe, M.D.

About one third of my patients that come to see me have been complaining of the chronic anxiety associated with this COVID-19 Pandemic. Some have developed tension headaches, stress stomachs, weight gain, and even nervous rashes. Some female patients have also complained of painful irregular menstrual periods.

To explain all the above, let's look at the biological stress response system: HPA (Hypothalamus Pituitary Adrenal) axis. It activates the "fight or flight response" in order to survive in acute stress situations. When it is activated chronically for months, it can cause deleterious effects and symptoms as above. Normally, the brain senses a threat and sends an electrical message to the hypothalamus which sends it to the pituitary gland at the base of the brain. This gland sends a chemical messenger called ACTH (AdrenoCorticoTropic Hormone) to the adrenal glands located on top of the kidneys to secrete hormones: Cortisol and Adrenalin. Chronic stress sends this into overdrive for a prolonged period of time. Cortisol raises sugar levels and Adrenalin raises heart rate and sends more oxygen to muscles to fight or flight. Cortisol is also anti-inflammatory and interacts with the body's immune system. Prolonged release of Cortisol can lead to Insulin resistance causing high sugar levels such as in Type 2 Diabetes Mellitus and weight gain especially with sedentary lifestyle as in the current COVID-19 Pandemic. Cortisol receptors in the skin also become resistant to its anti-inflammatory effects and may inflame the skin, stomach, and arteries, leading to itchy rashes, stress gastritis, painful irregular menses, and tension/vascular/migraine headaches. Stress and adrenalin also cause insomnia which disrupts the internal clock called Circadian Rhythm similar to Jet Lag. Lack of REM (Rapid Eye Movement, the most detoxifying period of sleep) leads to daytime fatigue, daytime hunger, sedentary lifestyle, and feelings of depression and loneliness especially in social isolation.

Moderate amount of exercise, such as walking around the block daily for 30 minutes, stop watching the news on TV or your cell phone, talking to friends and family, even virtual visits can all help to reduce your stress level.

There are numerous sources available to those who need help in these stressful times. Many physicians and therapist provide telemedicine to help you cope. You can also contact www.betterhelp.com for additional counseling.

Your family doctor would be the best person to advise you if you need any additional information to survive these challenging times.