

Long-Lasting Stress Increases Risk of Heart Disease

Stress can keep folks from exercising or eating well, contributing to cardiovascular disease.

December 1, 2023 By Laura Schmidt

[Higher levels of stress](#) over time contribute to people's risk of [cardiovascular disease](#), according to researchers at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center.

Many Latinos experience high stress due to systemic [disparities](#), limited [access to health care](#) and [food insecurity](#), and this stress has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, according to [a report](#) from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

"There's a huge mind-heart connection that we don't emphasize enough as physicians," lead study author and cardiology fellow Ijeoma Eleazu, MD, told [KERA News](#). "We are so focused on the physical components, but really taking care of your mind can impact your physical health as well."

For [the study](#), researchers utilized data from the [Dallas Heart Study](#) to measure psychosocial, financial and neighborhood stress.

They found that racial and ethnic discrimination as well as lack of health insurance contributed to increased stress levels. What's more, stress was higher among people who were younger, female, Latino, Black and low income.

Stress measurements were based on social determinants of health, including financial security, housing, food, transportation and safety. When people are stressed, they are more likely to smoke or eat poorly and not to exercise, which raises the risk for heart disease, Eleazu said.

"Honestly, you feel helpless in some ways when you think about these things and, for me, how they affect my patients," she said. "[But] we found, essentially, that there's no downside to assessing your patients' stress."

The [CDC notes](#) that when people have severe or long-lasting stress, their bodies respond by raising levels of stress hormones, particularly cortisol, and keeping them raised, which over time can give rise to high blood pressure and type 2 diabetes.

Even after accounting for high blood pressure and high cholesterol among participants,

researchers found that higher levels of stress were linked to [atherosclerosis](#), a buildup of plaque in the arteries. The condition develops slowly and causes arteries to narrow and can cause blood clots, heart attacks and strokes, according to the [National Institutes of Health](#).

“We’re extending on what prior research has shown, that chronic stress can impact the heart,” she said. “This is a great opportunity to really use it to effect change.”

To read more, click [#Stress](#). There, you’ll find headlines such as “[Campaign Aims to Reduce Stress in Latinos](#),” “[Screening for Pregnancy Anxiety May Help Reduce Early Births](#)” and “[Asians, Blacks and Latinos Less Likely to Go to Cardiac Rehab](#).”

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