

More than 1 in 4 Americans report daily stress impairs their functioning.¹

Stress as a Social Determinant of Health

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Social and community context is one of five key domains of the **Social Determinants of Health (SDOH)**.² It recognizes how people's interactions with others and the broader community, as well as the settings where people live, work, and socialize, can greatly impact their health and well-being. **Stress**, along with other factors such as social cohesion, community engagement, and workplace conditions, are key SDOHs under this domain.³

Stress is our **physiological reaction to perceived challenges and/or difficult situations (stressors)**.⁴ It is driven by a range of **social and economic factors**, including discrimination, poverty, food insecurity, caregiving burden, financial hardship, and social isolation.^{5,6} In particular, chronic stress sustained over long periods is generally thought to be more harmful than short-term stress, as the cumulative burden causes wear and tear in our stress response systems. This results in poorer health outcomes such as increased inflammation, suppressed immunity, and chronic diseases.⁷

However, it is worth noting that **not all stress is harmful**. Moderate amount of stress can, in fact, play a constructive role. When people are presented with manageable or acute challenges they can eventually overcome, the process can **encourage growth, resilience, and skill-building**. Individuals can also walk away from these challenges with improved coping strategies, feeling better prepared for future difficulties.⁸

Research shows, however, that stress is not distributed equally across the population. **Women report higher average stress levels** than men and often feel less supported emotionally. **Younger adults (18–44)** report more stress related to finances, the economy, discrimination, and family obligations than **older adults (65+)**, who still report significant stressors like health concerns and the economy, and are more likely to delay support-seeking. **Racial and ethnic minorities** also face higher stress exposure due to systemic discrimination and socioeconomic disadvantage.

75% of Americans report experiencing one symptom of stress in the past month⁵

Mechanism and Demographics

Health Effects of Stress

Coping and Resources

Physical

- Increased risk for **cardiovascular and metabolic diseases**, such as hypertension and diabetes.⁹
- **Unhealthy coping behaviors** like smoking, poor diet, and alcohol use.
- Long-term biological impacts, including altered brain and immune function.⁵
- **Older adults** under chronic stress face heightened risks of cognitive decline and chronic illness.¹⁰

Mental

- Increased risk of **depression, anxiety, and feelings of hopelessness**.
- Impaired emotion regulation capacity and problem-solving ability under pressure
- Cumulative stress can impair **sleep**, increase vulnerability to psychiatric conditions, and worsen existing mental health disorders.^{5,9}

Social

- Unhealthy social environments and compound stress over time.
- **Older adults** may face stress due to **loneliness, isolation, bereavement**, and limited access to community spaces.¹⁰
- Racial and ethnic minorities and low-SES groups face higher rates of everyday discrimination and stress exposure.⁷
- **Disrupted family dynamics and social networks**.¹¹

Structurally, policies need to be equitable and inclusive to alleviate systematic stressors like discrimination, health inequity, poverty, and more.^{5,11}

On an individual level:

- People with stress and anxiety disorders often breathe more rapidly and erratically, which can reinforce feelings of distress. Research shows that **consistent meditation or breathing practices**, such as **diaphragmatic breathing**, which encourages a more complete exchange from oxygen to carbon dioxide by breathing into your belly, has shown promise to reduce stress and improve physiological markers like respiratory rate, salivary cortisol, and blood pressure.^{12, 13}
- **Regular aerobic exercise** reduces stress through neurochemical and behavioral pathways. It lowers stress hormones like cortisol and adrenaline while boosting endorphins, elevating mood and promoting relaxation. Activities involving large muscle groups in rhythmic, repetitive motion such as walking, jogging, or elliptical are especially effective.¹⁴
- **Improving sleep hygiene by cutting alcohol use before bed**. Sleep is essential for managing stress, helping the brain process emotions and restore balance. However, alcohol disrupts this process by delaying and reducing REM sleep, which is vital for emotional health & memory. To improve sleep and reduce stress, try maintaining a consistent sleep schedule, creating a calm and cool sleep environment, and limiting alcohol and caffeine before bedtime.^{15, 16}



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