
CENTRAL PA HEALTH CARE QUALITY UNIT NEWSLETTER FOR HEALTHY OUTCOMES

September 2008 - Volume 8, Issue 7

a monthly newsletter provided by the Central PA Health Care Quality Unit

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Stress Less

Even though it's vital to survival, stress has a bad reputation. When you perceive stress, your sympathetic nervous system triggers the "fight or flight" response to prepare your body for action. A release of hormones quickens your heart rate and breathing, and extra blood is pumped to your muscles and organs to provide them with a burst of energy. Ongoing stress has harmful long-term effects, including raising your blood pressure.

One study suggests that mental stress not only affects blood pressure, but may also thicken artery walls, a condition that can trigger heart attacks and strokes.

If you are often tense, the following stress reduction strategies can help.

Get enough sleep. Lack of sound sleep can affect your mood, mental alertness, energy level, and physical health.

Exercise. Physical activity alleviates stress and reduces your risk of becoming depressed.

Learn relaxation techniques. Meditation, progressive muscle relaxation, guided imagery, deep breathing exercises, and yoga are the mainstays of stress relief. Your local hospital may offer meditation or yoga classes, or you can learn about these techniques from books or videotapes.

Strengthen your social network. Studies show that social ties significantly protect health and well-being. Try to connect with others by taking a class, joining an organization, or participating in a support group.

Learn time-management skills. These skills can help you juggle work and family demands.

Confront stressful situations head-on. Don't let stressful situations fester. Hold family problem-solving sessions and use negotiation skills at work.

Nurture yourself. Treat yourself to a massage. Truly savor an experience: Eat slowly, focusing on each bite of that orange, or soak up the warm rays of the sun or the scent of blooming flowers during a walk outdoors. Take a nap. Enjoy the sounds of music you find calming.

Talk to your doctor. If stress and anxiety persist, talk to your doctor about whether anti-anxiety medications could be helpful.

Quick stress relief exercises

When you have one minute. Place your hand just beneath your navel so you can feel the gentle rise and fall of your belly as you breathe. Breathe in. Pause for a count of three. Breathe out. Pause for a count of three. Continue to breathe deeply for one minute, pausing for a count of three after each inhalation and exhalation.

When you've got 3 minutes. While sitting down, take a break from whatever you're doing and check your body for tension. Relax your facial muscles and allow your jaw to fall open slightly. Let your shoulders drop. Let your arms fall to your sides. Allow your hands to loosen so that there are spaces between your fingers. Uncross your legs or ankles. Feel your thighs sink into your chair, letting your legs fall comfortably apart. Feel your shins and calves become heavier and your feet grow roots into the floor. Now breathe in slowly and breathe out slowly. Each time you breathe out, try to relax even more.

When you've got 10 minutes. Try imagery. Start by sitting comfortably in a quiet room. Breathe deeply and evenly for a few minutes. Now picture yourself in a special place. Choose an image that conjures up good memories. What do you smell — the ocean at the beach, crisp fall air, the aroma of baking bread? What do you hear? Focus on sensory pleasures: the swoosh of a gentle wind, the soft cool grass tickling your feet. Passively observe intrusive thoughts and then gently disengage from them to return to the world you've created. This really does work.

The information offered in this newsletter is to increase your awareness of health related conditions and situations and not intended to be a substitute for professional medical advice.

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Dermatitis

From MerckSource.com

Dermatitis (eczema) is inflammation of the upper layers of the skin, causing itching, blisters, redness, swelling, and often oozing, scabbing, and scaling.

Dermatitis is a broad term covering many different disorders that all result in a red, itchy rash. The term eczema is sometimes used for dermatitis. Some types of dermatitis affect only specific parts of the body, whereas others can occur anywhere. Some types of dermatitis have a known cause, whereas others do not. However, dermatitis is always the skin's way of reacting to severe dryness, scratching, an irritating substance, or an allergen. Typically, that substance comes in direct contact with the skin, but sometimes the substance is swallowed. In all cases, continuous scratching and rubbing may eventually lead to thickening and hardening of the skin.

Dermatitis may be a brief reaction to a substance. In such cases it may produce symptoms, such as itching and redness, for just a few hours or for only a day or two. Chronic dermatitis persists over a period of time. The hands and feet are particularly vulnerable to chronic dermatitis, because the hands are in frequent contact with many foreign substances and the feet are in the warm, moist conditions created by socks and shoes that favor fungal growth.

Chronic dermatitis may represent a contact, fungal, or other dermatitis that has been inadequately diagnosed or treated, or it may be one of several chronic skin disorders of unknown origin. Because chronic dermatitis produces cracks and blisters in the skin, any type of chronic dermatitis may lead to bacterial infection.

Contact dermatitis is skin inflammation caused by direct contact with a particular substance. The rash is very itchy, is confined to a specific area, and often has clearly defined boundaries.



Substances can cause skin inflammation by one of two mechanisms—**irritation** (irritant contact dermatitis) **or allergic reaction** (allergic contact dermatitis).

Irritant contact dermatitis, which accounts for 80% of all cases of contact dermatitis, occurs when a chemical substance causes direct damage to the skin; symptoms are more painful than itchy. Typical irritating substances are acids, alkalis (such as drain cleaners), solvents (such as acetone in nail polish remover), strong soaps, and plants (such as poinsettias and peppers). Some of these chemicals cause skin changes within a few minutes, whereas others require longer exposure. People vary in the sensitivity of their skin to irritants. Even very mild soaps and detergents may irritate the skin of some people after frequent or prolonged contact.

Allergic contact dermatitis is a reaction by the body's immune system to a substance contacting the skin. Sometimes a person can be sensitized by only one exposure, and other times sensitization occurs only after many exposures to a substance. After a person is sensitized, the next exposure causes itching and dermatitis within 4 to 24 hours, although some people, particularly older people, do not develop a reaction for 3 to 4 days.

Thousands of substances can result in allergic contact dermatitis. The most common include substances found in plants such as poison ivy, rubber (latex), antibiotics, fragrances, preservatives, and some metals (such as nickel and cobalt). About 10% of women are allergic to nickel, a common component of jewelry. People may use (or be exposed to) substances for years without a problem, then suddenly develop an allergic reaction. Even ointments, creams, and lotions used to treat dermatitis can cause such a reaction. People may also develop dermatitis from many of the materials they touch while at work (occupational dermatitis).

Sometimes contact dermatitis results only after a person touches certain substances and then exposes the skin to sunlight (photo allergic or phototoxic contact dermatitis). Such substances include sunscreens, aftershave lotions, certain perfumes, antibiotics, coal tar, and oils.

Symptoms and Diagnosis

Regardless of cause or type, contact dermatitis results in itching and a rash. The itching is usually severe, but the rash varies from a mild, short-lived redness to severe swelling and large blisters. Most commonly, the rash contains tiny blisters. The rash develops only in areas contacted by the substance. However, the rash appears earlier in thin, sensitive areas of skin, and later in areas of thicker skin or on skin that had less contact with the substance, giving the impression that the rash has spread. Touching the rash or blister fluid cannot spread contact dermatitis to other people or to other parts of the body that did not make contact with the substance.

Determining the cause of contact dermatitis is not always easy. The person's occupation, hobbies, household duties, vacations, clothing, topical drug use, cosmetics, and household members' activities must be considered. Most people are unaware of all the substances that touch their skin. Often, the location of the initial rash is an important clue, particularly if it occurs under an item of clothing or jewelry or only in areas exposed to sunlight. However, many substances that people touch with their hands are unknowingly transferred to the face, where the more sensitive facial skin may react even if the hands do not.

The "use test," in which a suspected substance is applied far from the original area of contact dermatitis (usually on the forearm), is useful when perfumes, shampoos, or other substances used in the home are suspected. If a doctor suspects contact dermatitis and a process of elimination do not pinpoint the cause, patch testing can be performed. For this test, small patches containing substances that commonly cause dermatitis are placed on the skin for 1 to 2 days to see whether a rash develops beneath one of them. Although useful, patch testing is complicated. People may be sensitive to many substances, and the substance they react to on a patch may not be the cause of their dermatitis. A doctor must decide which substances to test based on what a person might have been exposed to.

Prevention and Treatment

Contact dermatitis can be prevented by avoiding contact with the causative substance. If contact does occur, the material should be washed off immediately with soap and water. If circumstances risk ongoing exposure, gloves and protective clothing may be helpful. Barrier creams are also available that can block certain substances, such as poison ivy and epoxy resins, from contacting the skin. Desensitization with injections or tablets of the causative substance is not effective in preventing contact dermatitis.

Treatment is not effective until there is no further contact with the substance causing the problem. Once the substance is removed, the redness usually disappears after a week. Blisters may continue to ooze and form crusts, but they soon dry. Residual scaling, itching, and temporary thickening of the skin may last for days or weeks. Itching can be relieved with a number of topical drugs or drugs taken by mouth. In addition, small areas of dermatitis can be soothed by applying pieces of gauze or thin cloth dipped in cool water or aluminum acetate (Burrow's solution) several times a day for an hour. Larger areas may be treated with short, cool tub baths. The doctor may drain fluid from a large blister, but the blister is not removed.

Seborrheic Dermatitis

Seborrheic dermatitis is chronic inflammation that causes yellow, greasy scales to form on the scalp and face and occasionally on other areas. The cause is unknown.

Seborrheic dermatitis occurs most often in infants, usually within the first 3 months of life, and in those aged 30 to 70 years. The disorder is more common among men, often runs in families, and is worse in cold weather.

Symptoms

Seborrheic dermatitis usually begins gradually, causing dry or greasy scaling of the scalp (dandruff), sometimes with itching but without hair loss. In more severe cases, yellowish to reddish scaly pimples appear along the hairline, behind the ears, in the ear canal, on the eyebrows, on the bridge of the nose, around the nose, on the chest, and on the upper back. In infants younger than 1 month of age, seborrheic dermatitis may produce a thick, yellow, crusted scalp rash (cradle cap) and sometimes yellow scaling behind the ears and red pimples on the face. Frequently, a stubborn diaper rash accompanies the scalp rash. Older children and adults may develop a thick, tenacious, scaly rash with large flakes of skin.



Treatment

The scalp can be treated with a shampoo containing pyrithione zinc, selenium sulfide, an antifungal drug, salicylic acid and sulfur, or tar. The person usually uses the medicated shampoo every other day until the dermatitis is controlled and then twice weekly. Ketoconazole cream is often effective as well. In adults, thick crusts and scales, if present, can be loosened with overnight application of corticosteroids or salicylic acid under a shower cap.

Often, treatment must be continued for many weeks. If the dermatitis returns after the treatment is discontinued, treatment can be restarted. Topical corticosteroids are also used on the head and other affected areas. On the face, only mild corticosteroids, such as 1% hydrocortisone, should be used. Even mild corticosteroids must be used cautiously, because long-term use can thin the skin and cause other problems.

Extending and Enhancing your Life

From MerckSource.com

It's all very well to pile up statistics on average life span and speculate about factors in the aging process and the biological limits of life. Yet what does this tell you about your own life? Simply, not enough. Clearly, much work remains to be done to crack the code of aging. But you don't have to wait until the final answers are in to take steps that might extend and enhance your life right now.

How well you age will help dictate how long you stay alive and how happy you are to do so. Whether or not your family is long-lived, the answers lie less in your genes than in your actions. Do you smoke? Do you eat well or poorly? Do you stay active? Are you connected to others? What ailments do you have now and, judging from family background and your current lifestyle, which ones are you likely to get?

A lot of the factors that contribute to ailments once assumed to be part of growing older are not written in stone. No matter what your age or stage of life, **you have the power to change** many of the variables that influence disability and longevity. In this section, you can learn how.

Eight steps toward a longer, healthier life

- **Don't smoke:** According to the American Cancer Society, smoking is responsible for nearly one in five deaths overall and almost a third of all cancer deaths. Extensive research has linked smoking to 12 types of cancer ranging from adult acute leukemia to bladder cancer. The most recent addition to the list is colorectal cancer.
- **Eat a healthy diet low in potentially dangerous fats (such as saturated fats and trans fats) and rich in whole grains, vegetables, and fruits:** A 1998 multi-study analysis showed that people who ate the largest amounts of fruits and vegetables — about 35 servings a week — reduced their risk of heart attack by 15% over those who ate the least.
- **Speak to your doctor about taking a daily multivitamin and be sure to get enough calcium:** A daily multivitamin might be good health insurance depending upon your situation. If your doctor recommends a multivitamin, look for one that has at least 400 micrograms (mcg) of folic acid, 2 milligrams of Vitamin B6 (pyridoxine), 2 micrograms of vitamin B12, and 400 international units (IU) of vitamin D.
- **Watch your weight and body shape:** A staggering 97 million Americans are overweight or obese, thus raising their risk of developing health woes from diabetes and gallstones to heart disease and stroke, not to mention ratcheting up the pangs of creaky and arthritic joints. Being overweight is the second leading cause of preventable death in the U.S. It boosts the risk of dying from any cause within 10 years by 60%. And obesity doubles that risk.
- **Challenge your mind:** If you hope to live a long life, it pays to ensure that you stay sharp enough to enjoy it. Staying mentally active appears to help ward off memory loss. Reading, working crossword puzzles, and acquiring new skills keeps your mind fit. The activity seems to expand the web of neuronal connections in the brain and helps keep neurons nimble and alive.
- **Be active every day:** Exercise trumps the risks of some unhealthy lifestyle choices and illnesses. According to a study of more than 25,000 men and 7,000 women, staying moderately fit proves protective even when a person smokes or has high blood pressure, high cholesterol, or other health problems.
- **Shore up your social safety net:** Close relationships are surely among the great pleasures of life. A warm friendship, a loving connection with a relative or partner, and other social ties keep you engaged, smoothing some of the inevitable bumps and easing the losses that come with time.
- **Protect your sight, hearing, and general health by following preventive-care guidelines:** Are you getting annual checkups for hearing and sight? Are there any other factors — such as medications, vitamin deficiencies, or chronic conditions — that could be better managed to help you stay as mentally sharp as possible? Discuss these issues with your doctor.

