

**Doctor's Bag**by Robert Sorrenti, MD  
Chief Medical Officer**WHEN TO TALK TO YOUR DOCTOR ABOUT STRESS**

Let's face it – no one lives a completely stress-free life; nor would we want to. Good stress gets the job done. It motivates us. It provides a sense of urgency that enables us to accomplish tasks, both large and small.

So how do you know when normal, day-to-day stress moves into the “unhealthy” category?

The answer is when it interferes with normal, day-to-day living.

Stress that makes you physically ill is unhealthy. Stress that prevents you from sleeping at night or interferes with proper nutritional habits is unhealthy. Stress that causes persistent emotional problems or repetitive self-destructive activity is unhealthy. Stress that keeps you from doing your job or interferes with your family life is unhealthy. These are just a few examples.

The important thing to understand about undue stress is that it increases your risk for many chronic health conditions. It can make you very sick, both physically and psychologically.

If you think stress is getting the best of you, don't hesitate to call your personal physician. Stress relief can take many forms – from the simple breathing exercises mentioned in this newsletter, to alternative relaxation therapies like yoga, to carefully monitored prescription medications and counseling.

**HLInfo** YOUR MONTHLY GUIDE TO HEALTH CARE AWARENESS**Breathing for Stress Relief**

Try this: Sit comfortably, relax your shoulders, close your eyes and take a very slow, deep breath through your nose. Hold it for a few seconds. Now release the air very slowly through your mouth. Repeat two or three times. You should feel calmer.

**Why does this work?** According to the Stress Management Health Center at WebMD, “Deep breathing is one of the best ways to lower stress in the body. When you breathe deeply it sends a message to your brain to calm down and relax. The brain then sends this message to your body. The things that happen when you are stressed, such as increased heart rate, fast breathing, and high blood pressure, all decrease as you breathe deeply to relax.”

**In with the good, out with the bad.**

Anatomically speaking, a breath of air taken through your nose or mouth travels down your windpipe and into your lungs. After passing through your bronchial tubes, the air reaches and enters the alveoli (air sacs.) Through very thin walls of the alveoli, oxygen from the air passes through the surrounding blood vessels to the pulmonary vein. The pulmonary vein delivers oxygen-rich blood to the left side of the heart which, in turn, pumps the blood into the rest of the body. When you exhale, carbon dioxide is released out of your lungs and windpipe, then out of your nose and mouth.

When you breathe deeply, your body absorbs more (good) oxygen and releases more (bad) carbon dioxide. No wonder you feel better.

**Stress and anxiety can take a real toll on your health.**

Short-term effects can include headaches, insomnia and upset stomach. Long-term stress can increase the risk for heart disease, depression, persistent muscle and joint pain, and a weakened immune system. Many people try to relieve stress by self-medicating with alcohol, drugs, smoking and over-eating.

By contrast, breathing exercises are healthy and don't cost money. They're easy to do and don't require any special equipment. The *DidUKnow* column to the right describes a couple of simple breathing exercises – why not give them a try?

**DidUKnow?**

The following exercises are from the Stress Management Center at WebMD. You can find more information about breathing exercises by visiting [www.webmd.com](http://www.webmd.com).

**Belly Breathing**

If you've never done breathing exercises before, this is a good place to start.

Sit in a comfortable position. Put one hand on your belly, just below your ribs and the other hand on your chest. Take a deep breath in through your nose, and let your belly push your hand out. Your chest should not move. Breathe out through pursed lips as if you were whistling. Feel the hand on your belly go in and use it to push all the air out. Repeat 3-10 times. Take your time with each breath.

**4-7-8 Breathing**

This exercise uses belly breathing to help you relax. You can do it seated or lying down.

Put one hand on your belly and the other on your chest. Take a deep, slow breath from the belly and silently count to 4 as you breathe in. Hold your breath and silently count to 7. Breathe out completely as you silently count to 8. Try to get all of the air out of your lungs. Repeat 3-7 times or until you feel calm.

**Newsletter Information Sources**

WebMD, “Stress Management: Breathing Exercises for Relaxation,” <http://www.webmd.com/balance/stress-management/stress-management-breathing-exercises-for-relaxation>

U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, National Institutes of Health, “What Happens When You Breathe?” [http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/dci/Diseases/hlw/hlw\\_when.html](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/dci/Diseases/hlw/hlw_when.html)