

## Fact Sheets: Stress

A growing epidemic of job-induced, stress-related illnesses -- heart disease, alcohol related illnesses, gastrointestinal problems and psychiatric disturbances, among others -- is taking a high toll on employees. Workers' compensation claims related to stress have tripled since 1980. Nationwide, job-related stress costs over \$150 billion each year in health care costs and lost productivity.

Employers and some health "experts" would have us believe that the problem lies in individuals who have personality problems or genetic defects that reduce their ability to cope with stress. Their solution to the problem is "stress management," where the individual must learn new methods for coping with stress (e.g., changing behavior, learning to meditate, etc.). New research on stress tells a different story. Working conditions now appear to be the primary cause of stress-related illnesses. When workers find themselves in stifling organizations that do not allow them to use their creativity and judgment, they are prone to get sick.

Workers who have 1) very psychologically demanding jobs 2) little control over their work and 3) very little social support (isolation from co-workers) are at increased risk for serious stress-related illnesses. The famous Framingham heart study discovered that female clerical workers have high rates of heart disease. Other studies have found that hectic and monotonous jobs can cause high blood pressure (hypertension), coronary heart disease and gastrointestinal problems (ulcers).

### What is stress?

Stress is a natural biological response to unusual demands. It is the survival mechanism that allows the body to react quickly and release extra energy to fight off danger or to run away. It is often referred to as the "fight or flight" reaction. We all know the feeling. A good example is braking to avoid hitting another car. The body releases adrenaline, the heart beats rapidly, breathing increases and perspiration starts to flow. Once out of danger, however, we begin to relax.

Negative stress never allows us to relax. In a stressful work environment, workers experience all the common stress reactions (rapid heartbeat, etc.) on a daily basis. Most, however, are in a state of constant alert. They never have an opportunity to return to a normal state of relaxation. This chronic stress causes wear and tear on the body.

### What causes stress?

In addition to little control, high demands and inadequate social support on the job, the following characteristics also contribute to stress:

- little opportunity to use creativity
- lack of job security
- shift work
- lack of recognition and support

Stress-related problems can grow worse if these causes of stress are combined with a bad physical environment (e.g., inadequate ventilation, poor lighting, excessive noise, or badly designed work stations).

### How does stress take its toll?

Stressed workers generally feel unhappy. They are usually irritated and easily angered or fatigued, lethargic and depressed. They tend to smoke, drink alcohol and use drugs as ways to relieve their job stress.

Physical symptoms are prominent. Chronic headaches, gastrointestinal problems, lower back pain, insomnia and rapid loss or gain of weight are frequently reported by stressed workers. Workers who remain in these environments may go on to experience serious illness, including coronary heart disease, high blood pressure, ulcers, colitis and frequent colds.

### **How can you relieve stress?**

The focus of most stress reduction programs is on the individual, but this is only a small part of the solution. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) has reported that workers who learn stress management techniques (biofeedback, muscle relaxation, anxiety management) can reduce their stress symptoms, but that the beneficial effects of these approaches usually last less than three months. These approaches treat the symptoms, but not the causes, of stress.

The symptoms of stress also can be reduced by:

- Eating the right foods. Sugar, salt, fat and alcohol all contribute to drowsiness, headaches and irritability.
- Exercise.
- Relaxation without the aid of alcohol and drugs.
- Support from co-workers, family and friends.

In the long run, the only cure for workplace stress is changing the working conditions. This is a big job that no individual can do alone. By working together, union members can get management to adopt the NIOSH recommendations for reducing workplace stress:

- Worker participation -- allowing workers to have input into decisions affecting their jobs.
- Work schedules -- designing schedules to accommodate workers' family responsibilities.
- Job responsibilities -- designing tasks that provide meaningful stimulation and the opportunity to use and improve skills.
- Social environment -- providing opportunities for social interaction, including emotional support and help with work.
- Job security -- providing information on the future of the job opportunities for career development.