

## Work

During the week, you may spend more hours at work than you do sleeping, and you almost certainly spend more time with your work colleagues than you do with your partner or family.

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### ISSUES:

- Controlling stress
- Sleep well
- Avoiding infectious disease
- Eat lunch!



Working takes up such a large part of our lives that it can also be a source of many health problems. Work-related stress, unsettled sleep, rushed lunches and catching every bug that's going around the office, are just part of the problem, while inactive, desk-based jobs could see people leading more sedentary lifestyles.

### Controlling stress

Workers in their 30s apparently put in the longest hours per week, so it's unsurprising that work-related stress accounts for over a third of all new incidences of ill health, with a total of 13.8 million working days lost to stress, depression and anxiety in 2006/07<sup>9</sup>. Many people only think about stress in terms of the effect on their minds, but what does it do to the body?

Stress in itself is not always a bad thing. When you're about to give a presentation, take a test or run a race for example, you will experience 'eustress' – a positive, short-term, controlled stress that keeps you alert and energised.

Stress can also result in headaches, muscle tension, fatigue and insomnia. A wide range of digestive problems can also be triggered by stress, such as bloating, constipation and diarrhoea.

Sixty per cent of British adults say they experience digestive problems when undergoing stressful situations.

Gut Week survey<sup>10</sup>

The release of stress hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol, which make the heart beat faster, can also influence the motility, or natural movement, of your digestive system. During a brief episode of extreme stress some people suffer diarrhoea or even vomiting. Long term stress can increase the risk of chronic conditions such as ulcers and a range of other gut complaints. According to The Gut Trust, the national charity for irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), this condition is 'frequently triggered by life changes, difficult life situations or stressful life events'. For more information on digestive disorders go to [www.loveyourgut.com](http://www.loveyourgut.com)



### Research focus

Recent research has indicated that probiotics could one day be used to help with some stress-related health problems. A study conducted in France, found that stressed volunteers consuming probiotics suffered less gastrointestinal symptoms compared to those given a placebo. Stress can also suppress the immune system and researchers are investigating probiotic benefit here as well. A study with university students suffering exam stress, found that consumption of a *Lactobacillus casei* probiotic was linked to a better level of certain defence cells in their immune system<sup>11</sup>.

### Ask the expert

**Breathe deeply:** When we feel stressed, our breathing may become shallower – take control with long, deep breaths, inhaling through the nose and exhaling through the mouth.

**Take time for you:** Dedicate 30 minutes to yourself every day.

**Plan ahead:** Get a diary and plan out work tasks, social appointments and financial commitments, so you feel more in control.

**Limit intake of caffeine:** Stimulants can worsen stress levels.

**Exercise:** Exercise dissipates the adrenaline that builds up in stressful situations and leaves us feeling a sense of achievement and control. It will help you sleep better too.

**Louise Hall**, Health Manager, Fit for Business



### Sleep well

One in five people have difficulty sleeping and half of these have persistent, or chronic, insomnia. That can mean either not being able to get off to sleep, or waking too early and not being able to go back to sleep for long periods. Too little sleep may mean you are tired and irritable during the day, have difficulty concentrating, are more vulnerable to infections or, more dangerously, are a risk to yourself and others when driving.

Everyone has different needs for sleep, and if you feel refreshed on just five hours of sleep a night then that may be enough for you, though most people perform best on six to eight hours. As you get older the average gets nearer to six hours.

Anxiety is one of the most frequent causes of sleep difficulties. Depression can disturb sleep patterns, which are often restored to normal when the depression is treated.