

Spring 2025

Health NEWS

How to relax and de-stress

PAGE 2

Take control of allergy symptoms

PAGE 3

Prepping for perimenopause

PAGE 5

Is intermittent fasting safe?

PAGE 6



VISIT US AT [METROPLUS.ORG](https://metroplus.org)

Do you speak a language other than English? MetroPlusHealth has Member Services staff who speak your language. If you need help making an appointment, call the Member Services Department at **877.475.3795 (TTY: 711)**.



Developed by Krames, a WebMD Ignite solution.
11087B

Stressed out?

Activate your body's 'stress reset button'



We all know that stress is an inevitable part of life. But did you know humans have a built-in antidote? It's called the relaxation response, and it's your body's natural "stress reset button."

Stress response vs. relaxation response

When you're stressed out, your body goes into "fight-or-flight" mode: your heart races, blood pressure rises, and stress hormones surge. It's normal for this to happen every now and then — after all, stress helps us cope with challenges in life. But when stress lingers, it can lead to serious health problems.

Enter the relaxation response. The exact opposite of the stress response, it slows your heart rate, lowers your blood pressure, and decreases your stress hormone levels. Essentially, it encourages your body to return to a state of calm.

Get ready to reset

Triggering the relaxation response is pretty straightforward, though it may take some practice. Here are three effective techniques to help you tap into this natural stress reliever:

1 Deep breathing. Take slow, deep breaths. Let your stomach or chest expand as you inhale, then concentrate on emptying your lungs completely. Focus on relaxing any tense part of your body, making each breath slower and deeper.

2 Mindfulness meditation. This is all about being in the present moment. Sit comfortably and pay attention to what you're

sensing and feeling. If your mind drifts, anchor back to the present by thinking about what you can see, hear, smell, taste, or touch right now. Got a few minutes? Chill out to the relaxing sounds of nature by clicking [here](#).

3 Gentle exercise. Activities like yoga and tai chi can help activate the relaxation response. The physical movements require focus, distracting your brain from any racing thoughts. Shape Up NYC offers free exercise classes. To search for a class, click [here](#).

Make it a habit

Remember: While stress is unavoidable, how you respond to it is within your control. Integrating one or more of these practices into your daily routine can stop stress from piling up. Start small, just a few minutes at a time, and gradually build from there. For more tips on managing stress, click [here](#).

How seasonal allergies affect your child's asthma

About 20% of children experience **seasonal allergies**. For some, symptoms occur in spring and summer, which is when most trees and grasses release pollen.

What do these warm-weather allergies mean for a child with asthma? Read on and learn how to make sure your child can enjoy all the fun that spring and summer offer.

Spot the symptoms

Pollen, dust, and other allergens can enter your child's airways when they breathe. If your child is allergic, they may start sneezing or coughing; their nose may run; and their eyes may get red, watery, and itchy. They may also have ear problems.

Also, heavy spring rain can cause mold indoors. What's more, longer warm seasons may make spring and summer allergies worse. So, even if your child has never shown symptoms before, stay watchful.

Allergies and asthma flare-ups

Unlike seasonal allergies, asthma is a long-term issue. During an asthma attack, your child's airways swell, making breathing harder. But allergic congestion makes breathing tough, too. Pollen and other allergens may build up in a child's airways, triggering an asthma attack.

Some 80% of children with asthma have allergies, too. So, it's a good idea to create an action plan you can follow if seasonal symptoms appear.

Limit contact with allergens

You can take various actions when pollen counts are high, such as keeping windows closed. Air-condition your home and car to filter out allergens.

Washing sheets weekly and blankets every two to three weeks, can also keep allergens from building up.

Consider medication

Antihistamines and nasal sprays can help relieve seasonal allergy symptoms. However, it's best to speak with your child's doctor about how to use these drugs, especially when your child has asthma.

When to seek care

A doctor's visit can help make sure your child's allergies are treated safely.

Severe asthma symptoms require emergency care. These symptoms include:

- Breathing troubles, even when resting in bed
- Lips/fingertips turning blue (lighter skin) or gray (darker skin)
- Straining to talk
- Confusion or not being able to pay attention
- Chest, neck, or abdominal tightness
- Needing to sit or stand to breathe easier



5 surprising things that can affect your pregnancy

If you're pregnant or planning a pregnancy, you probably already know about the negative effects that alcohol, tobacco, and unhealthy eating can have for you and your growing baby. But other things in your everyday life can affect your pregnancy, too. Here are five to keep in mind:

1 Dental care: Don't skip it. Teeth cleanings, dental exams, and routine dental work under local anesthesia is safe during pregnancy. In fact, keeping your teeth and gums healthy may reduce the amount of cavity-causing bacteria you pass along to your baby after birth.

2 Pets: Know when to be cautious. Be careful with some pets and pet-care chores. For instance, have someone else clean the cat's litter box; feline feces may carry a parasite that causes toxoplasmosis infections. Steer clear of pet mice, hamsters, and guinea pigs. Their droppings, saliva, and bedding can transmit lymphocytic choriomeningitis, or LCMV, a virus that can cause miscarriage. And don't keep reptiles or amphibians in your home during pregnancy or if you have kids younger than age 5 — these pets can carry salmonella.

3 Secondhand and thirdhand smoke: Avoid it. Breathing smoke from other people's tobacco products could increase the risk for low birth weight, sudden infant death syndrome, and learning problems for

babies. It can also raise odds for miscarriage. Even exposure to smoke residue left behind on furniture, rugs, and walls can cause problems for your baby, such as interfering with healthy lung development. MetroPlusHealth offers smoking- and vaping-cessation resources. To learn more, click [here](#). You can also visit the **New York State Quitline**, or call **866.697.8487** to apply for a free starter kit of nicotine medications and talk with a quit coach.

4 Canned goods, some plastics: Cut back if you can. Exposure to the chemical bisphenol A during pregnancy could affect your infant's nervous system and behavioral development. Eat fresh or frozen fruits and vegetables instead of canned food; don't microwave food or drinks in polycarbonate containers (hard, clear plastic — usually with a recycling code "7" on the bottom); and replace any older, scratched, or clouded polycarbonate plastic containers.

5 Sexually transmitted infections (STIs): Say yes to tests, treatments. Untreated STIs can cause serious complications,

including premature birth and low birth weight. Some, like the herpes simplex and hepatitis B viruses, can be passed along to your baby. All pregnant women should be **screened for STIs** like syphilis, hepatitis B, and HIV. Your doctor may recommend tests for chlamydia, gonorrhea, and hepatitis C if you are at high risk — for example, if you or your partner has multiple sexual partners or your partner has an STI.



Perimenopause checklist:

Your guide to a healthy transition



If you're in your 30s or 40s, perimenopause may still be a long way off. But why not start prepping to make this natural life transition as smooth as possible? "Future you" will be glad you did.

First, let's define it and talk about the phase that follows, which is menopause itself.

Perimenopause and menopause basics

Perimenopause, meaning "around menopause," starts as your ovaries begin producing less estrogen. This causes the amount of time between your periods to start changing. You may have symptoms such as:

- Mood changes
- Heavier or lighter periods than you used to have
- Hot flashes
- Night sweats
- Vaginal dryness

Menopause typically occurs between the ages of 40 and 58, and perimenopause usually happens four to eight years before that. You're in menopause after not having a period for 12 consecutive months. In menopause, you may experience some of the same symptoms as you did in perimenopause.

Checklist: Preparing for perimenopause

Even if it seems like perimenopause is years away, it helps to take some steps to support your physical and mental health. Use this checklist to get started.

- **Start adding more healthy foods to your plate.** Have plenty of plant-based foods, such as fruits and veggies. Also, consume protein and calcium-rich foods to help preserve your muscles and keep your bones strong. Looking for healthy recipes? Click [here](#).
- **Hit the weights regularly.** Your body starts to lose

muscle mass around perimenopause, increasing your chances for osteoporosis. Add strength training to your workout routine to help slow age-related bone loss. For tips on strength training, click [here](#).

- **Prioritize adequate shut-eye.** Too little sleep can make it harder to control your emotions — that includes making it more difficult to cope with change. Help yourself relax by skipping screen time for an hour before bed and keeping your room dark, cool, and quiet.
- **Be ready to ask for help if you need it.** Your OB-GYN can refer you to a mental health professional to support you during this time. Antidepressants can help with symptoms of depression and anxiety. There are also medications that ease perimenopause symptoms by providing your body with estrogen.

For more tips on coping with perimenopause, click [here](#).



Q&A: Is intermittent fasting safe?

Intermittent fasting (IF) has become a buzzword, promising everything from weight loss to protection against disease. But recent headlines have sparked some concerns.

Here's a closer look at IF and what the research says.

Q: What is IF?

A: Intermittent fasting is an eating pattern that cycles between times when you eat and times when you don't. The not-eating, or fasting, period can vary in length. Some people choose to fast for several hours each day, while others may fast for an entire day.

Q: Is it dangerous?

A: It can be for those living with diabetes. That's because IF increases the chances of developing hypoglycemia (low blood sugar).

Q: Are there other side effects?

A: Yes. Potential risks and side effects include:

- Headaches
- Constipation
- Weakness and low energy
- Dehydration
- Difficulty concentrating
- Fainting
- Overeating after fasting periods

However, there are ways to reduce IF side effects. (Keep reading to learn more.)

Q: What about the benefits?

A: There's research that suggests circadian rhythm fasting — eating in an eight- to 10-hour daytime window — can be an effective way to lose weight when combined with healthy lifestyle habits. Though when you compare IF to other eating plans, there's no clear winner.

Additional reported IF benefits include improvements in:

- Blood pressure
- Blood sugar
- Resting heart rate
- Cholesterol levels

Q: If I want to try it, how should I start?

A: It's best to ease into IF. Take several months to reduce your time window for eating. Letting your body adjust slowly will help limit the side effects.

Other ways to minimize risks include:

- **Staying hydrated:** Drink plenty of water during fasting periods.
- **Balancing what you eat:** It's important to meet nutritional needs during your eating windows. Focus on adding more fruits and veggies, fiber, and healthy proteins and fats to your plate. Avoid sugar, refined grains, and processed foods.
- **Consulting the experts:** If you have diabetes or another health condition — or take medication — talk with your doctor before trying IF.

5 STRETCHES you can do in bed

Do these exercises in the morning or anytime.

Start your day off right before you even shake off the covers. How? By doing a few simple stretches in bed.

These easy movements can wake you up, clear your mind, and jump-start your morning, all in just a few minutes. Aim to hold each stretch for about 30 seconds. Repeat, if it feels good.

Banded hamstring stretch

Stay on your back. Grab a towel, band, or strap and place it around the bottom of your right foot. Keeping your right knee straight, lift your leg toward the ceiling. Gently pull on the towel or strap until you feel a stretch along the back of your right thigh, which is your hamstring. Hold, lower your leg, then repeat with the left leg.

Child's pose

Flip over onto all fours, with your knees on the bed shoulder-width apart. Drop your glutes toward your heels, stretch your arms forward, and lower your forehead to the bed. You'll feel a stretch in your lower back, hips, and thighs.

Cobra

Start by lying face down. Place your hands on the bed, palms down, underneath your shoulders. Push them down into the bed and straighten your arms to lift your chest and torso as your back arches. As you do this, keep your shoulders relaxed, your legs stretched out behind you, and the tops of your feet against the sheets.

Triceps stretch

Sit up and raise your right arm over your head. Bend your elbow so your hand reaches down toward your left shoulder blade. Then, reach your left hand up to grasp the elbow, gently pulling it toward the left shoulder to stretch the back of your right arm. Hold, lower your arms, then repeat on the other side.

Upper body and arm stretch

From the seated position, raise both hands overhead, fingers clasped together. Flip your palms toward the ceiling and push your hands up, lengthening your arms and your entire upper body.

To learn more about stretching, click [here](#).



Take steps to reduce your cancer risk

You have more control over cancer than you might think. While there's no guaranteed way to prevent it, a recent study found that in adults ages 30 and older, about 40% of new cancer cases — and nearly half of cancer deaths — are linked to things we can work to change.

Here's the clearest place to start: Don't smoke. Smoking caused the highest number of cancer cases and deaths in the study, and secondhand smoke was a major contributor as well. Quitting not only lowers your risk for cancer, but also protects the people around you.

What else can you do? The chart below highlights additional risk factors identified in the study — along with tips to start addressing them.



Risk	Tips	Resources
Alcohol consumption	The less you drink, the better. Consider designating “alcohol-free” days every week.	Take a quiz and make a plan at cdc.gov/drinklessbeyourbest .
Excess body weight	If you're carrying extra weight, losing pounds can lower your cancer risk. Healthy food choices and exercise are part of the equation.	Get resources and advice at cdc.gov/healthy-weight-growth .
Food choices	Eat more fruit, nonstarchy vegetables, and foods with fiber or calcium. Avoid or eat less processed and red meat.	Want to try a healthy recipe? Search for recipes here .
Infections	Ask your doctor if you should have: ■ Vaccines for human papillomavirus (HPV) and hepatitis B ■ A screening test for hepatitis C, which can lead to liver cancer if left untreated ■ An HPV and/or a Pap test to screen for cervical cancer	Visit cancer.org and click on “All About Cancer” for information on prevention, screenings, and more.
Physical inactivity	Replace time sitting with movement. Work your way up to at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity activity a week.	To find free fitness classes through Shape Up NYC, click here .
Ultraviolet rays	Protect your skin by: ■ Limiting time in the sun from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. ■ Wearing broad-spectrum SPF 30 or higher sunscreen outdoors	For tips on selecting a sunscreen, click here .

Do you need help quitting smoking?

To take advantage of MetroPlusHealth's smoking- and vaping-cessation resources, click [here](#). You can also visit the **New York State Quitline**, or call **866.697.8487** to apply for a free starter kit of nicotine medications.