

Stress: The Fight or Flight Response

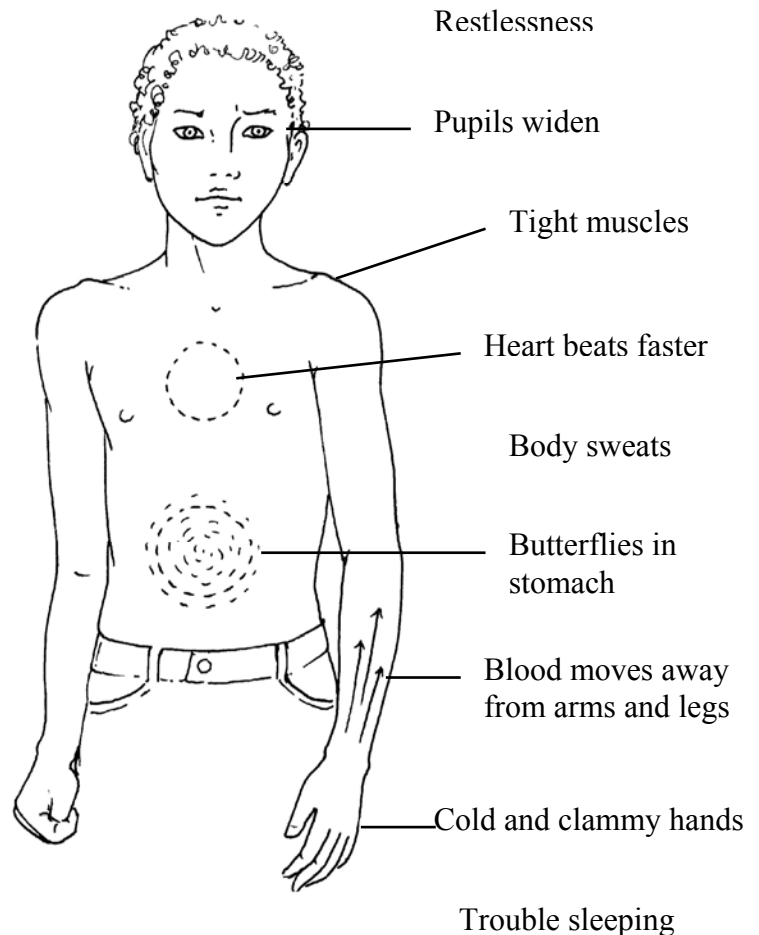
Have you ever noticed your hands feeling cold or sweaty when you are nervous or tense about something? Do you ever feel your heart beating faster or butterflies in your stomach?

What is fight or flight?

When you are stressed or nervous, your body goes into an emergency action plan called the fight or flight response. This response protects you from danger by preparing your body to defend itself (fight) or to run away from the stressor (flight).

What are the signs?

- Cold and clammy hands
- Body sweats
- Heart beats faster
- Butterflies in your stomach
- Tight muscles
- Pupils widen
- Restlessness
- Trouble sleeping
- Blood moves away from the arms and legs. During a stressful time, your blood vessels carry more blood to the center of the body and larger muscles that are needed to run or defend yourself. This means that less blood is needed in your hands, which makes them feel cold.



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What about the caveman thing?

This whole body response is thought to come from our caveman ancestors, the hunters and gatherers. Their basic instincts lead them to fight wild animals or to run away from them in order to survive. When this happens, your nerves are preparing you to deal with something that is dangerous, like a bear coming towards you.

Nowadays, we are not around wild animals. Our modern stressors are things like school, brothers and sisters, or playing an important game in sports. You can even have this response before you take a test you are nervous about. Even though a scary test is not the same as a bear, your nervous system does not know the difference. It still responds as a caveman used to when he thought he was in danger!

How do I reduce my stress?

Try deep abdominal breathing and relaxing your muscles as much as possible. The trick is to do this often, especially at the beginning of a headache, stomachache or when you feel other signs of stress. The sooner you start your relaxation, the better it works.

TO LEARN MORE

- **Adolescent Medicine (206) 987-2028**
- **Adolescent Medicine Nursing Line (206) 987-3005**
- **Your Child's Health-Care Provider**

Children's will make this information available in alternate formats upon request. Please call the Family Resource Center at (206) 987-2201.

This handout has been reviewed by clinical staff at Children's Hospital. However, your child's needs are unique. Before you act or rely upon this information, please talk with your child's health-care provider.