

Coping with the stress that environmental contamination can cause

Environmental contamination in your community can disrupt life as usual. Feeling stress is a normal reaction to this unusual situation.

This fact sheet discusses some reasons people feel stress about environmental contamination, what you can do to support your health if you feel stress, and who to contact if you need help dealing with stress.



Stress is your body's natural reaction to any kind of threat that disrupts life as usual.

While not all stress is bad, ongoing stress can lead to mental and physical health effects.

Environmental contamination can cause stress for several reasons.

- **You may feel unsafe at home.**
You may worry that your home and neighborhood are unsafe.
- **You may fear for your children's health.**
If you have little or no control over possible harmful exposures, you may feel you can't protect your children from harm.
- **You may feel uncertain about your present and future health.**
It's often not easy to spot or measure health effects from exposure to environmental contaminants. Sometimes people exposed to contaminants don't show health problems until years later. Sometimes exposure is at levels that will not cause harm. You may feel like you can't protect your health or gain closure because of these uncertainties.
- **Your family and community may have conflict.**
Family and community members may disagree about how serious the environmental contamination is and what to do about it.
- **You may feel frustrated by the long investigation.**
Investigating environmental exposure and health risks, as well as cleaning up contaminated areas, can take years. Waiting can be stressful, especially if you are worried about your family's health.
- **You may lose trust in government, community leaders, organizations, and businesses.**
You may lose trust in people or organizations that caused the problem or could have prevented it. You may also worry that you are not getting the information you need to protect your health.
- **You may have financial concerns.**
If you are a property owner, you may fear that environmental contamination will lower your property value.

There are ways to cope with the stress that environmental contamination can cause.

Inform yourself and your family

- Stay informed about the environmental contamination using trusted sources of information.
- Talk with your children. Help them understand the situation using simple, factual statements appropriate for their age.
- Learn about resources in your community to help you cope with stress.
- Learn what steps you can take to avoid or reduce exposure to harmful chemicals.

Connect with your community and help out

- Tell your story. Listen to others' stories.
- Find out what people need and how you can help.
- Get involved in the response to the contamination.
- Join or start a community group.

Take care of yourself

- Continue your healthy, regular routines. Make time to eat well, exercise, have fun, and relax.
- Focus on your personal strengths.
- Connect with family and friends.
- Watch for signs of stress (see box).

Some common signs of stress

Your behavior ▪ Change in your energy and activity levels ▪ Trouble relaxing or sleeping ▪ Start or increase use of alcohol, tobacco, or drugs	Your emotions Feeling ▪ Nervous, anxious, or fearful ▪ Irritable and angry
Your body ▪ Stomachaches or diarrhea ▪ Headaches and other pains	Your thinking Problems with ▪ Memory ▪ Confusion



Seek help if stress is negatively affecting your daily life.

High levels of stress can make everyday activities seem harder, and ongoing stress can contribute to or worsen existing health problems such as heart disease and high blood pressure. If you or your loved ones feel overwhelmed, seek help.

Get in touch with:

- Your doctor
- A religious or spiritual leader
- A local mental health provider:
<https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/>
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) Disaster Distress Helpline: 1-800-985-5990 or text TalkWithUs to 66746

For more information about ATSDR see:
www.atsdr.cdc.gov