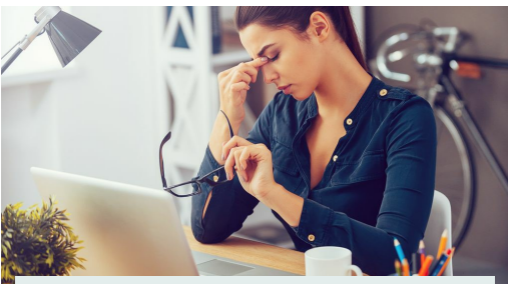


Coach &gt; Fitness

# Is excessive stress making you fat?

By Stuart Marsh | 3 days ago



Work stressors can be little, but they add up over time. (Image: iStock)

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**You work hard, you play hard and you train hard. So why can't you shake that last little bit of belly fat or drop those stubborn few kilos? The answer may lie in your stress levels.**

According to Ricardo Riskalla, owner of [RawFit Personal Training](#) and the head trainer at IMG Models Australia, managing your stress levels is the last key in the health puzzle that many people ignore.

"I am a big believer that mental stress is the biggest problem in society nowadays," Riskalla tells Coach.

"When one is stressed, the whole body systems go into havoc. And if stress continues for a long time one of the consequences is weight gain."

## The cortisol factor

We all know that after a long, stressful day in the office it's oh-so-easy to tuck into a packet of biscuits or down a bottle of wine – but that's not the sole reason why being frantic can cause you to add kilos to your waistline.

The real reason, says Riskalla, is down to a certain hormone that our bodies produce under heated conditions called cortisol.

When our bodies are under significant stress (even if it is all mental), it triggers our "fight or flight" hormonal response, which pumps out increased levels of cortisol.

Cortisol works to limit certain functions in our bodies (like the ability of your muscles to repair itself with protein) in order to allow the body to have more energy to handle the stress.

Over a long period of time, increased levels of cortisol cause muscle wastage (because they aren't repairing themselves) and cause you to hold onto body fat (because the body believes it will need it for instant energy).

It's easier to think of it in terms of an analogy: if we were cavemen being attacked by a bear, the body pumps out cortisol to give our muscles the strength to fight it off or run away.

Obviously in the 10 minutes you're spending bear fighting, you'd want your body to be pouring every last ounce of energy into your muscles – now is not the time for muscle recovery or immune system strengthening.

But as Riskalla explains, there's actually a whole lot of artificial modern equivalents to "bear fighting", like answering rude emails, catching the bus on time and curating your Instagram account – and they add up.

"The stress hormone cortisol is responsible for changing the immune system responses, plus it disrupts the digestive and reproductive systems," says Riskalla.

"Cortisol is the part of your body's alarm system. Every time there is a stress attacking your body, minor or major, from stressing about your latest TV show to a war, the body will compute that as stress."

"And let me tell you it can build up very easily."

## The more stress you have, the less you can recover

For many of us, the belief is that the life we've always dreamed of can be achieved by simply doing *more*.

If only we exercised two hours a day instead of one, we'll be skinny; and if only we came to work an hour early, we'd be successful – but as Riskalla explains, it doesn't always work that way.

That's because the more stress factors you in your life – be they mental, emotional, or physical – the less capacity you have left in the tank for recovery.

In physical terms, a CEO running a high-stakes company with many daily stressors would have less of a capacity to recover from a tough weights session than say, a uni student on break.

(Of course stress is highly individual – you don't need to be a CEO to feel incredible amounts of stress.)

"For one person working five hours a day would be stressful, for another one maybe not," says Riskalla.

"Internal and external stressors would cause cortisol to rise and fail. It all gets back to the mind and how one perceives life."

## The easy way to nip stress (and excessive cortisol) in the bud

Obviously it's impossible to live a life completely devoid of stress – but that doesn't mean you have to resign yourself to live in "skinnyfat" purgatory.

Riskalla recommends instead of trying to change the external stress factors in your life, it's far wiser to control how you personally react to those stress factors.

"To lower cortisol one must practice meditation or deep breathing practice every day, a few times a day," says Riskalla.

"I recommend for my clients to do it when waking up and before bed for 20 minutes."

By deep breathing early and late in the day, not only do you increase your likelihood of a good night's rest, you also enter a better state of mindfulness, which [has been proven countless times](#) to enhance your wellbeing.

"Yes, there are things in your life that might be huge stress factors," says Riskalla.

"But with a calm mind, things that before were massive stressors before become like a walk in the park.

"By creating a different perspective in your mind, and like taking stressful events as life lessons, you can move on."

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