

## **AMERICANS ENGAGE IN UNHEALTHY BEHAVIORS TO MANAGE STRESS**

### **New Survey Findings Show Gender Differences Connections Between Stress and Unhealthy Choices Affect Mind/Body Health**

New York, February 23, 2006 – Americans engage in unhealthy behaviors such as comfort eating, poor diet choices, smoking and inactivity to help deal with stress, according to a new national survey released today. People experiencing stress are more likely to report hypertension, anxiety or depression and obesity. In particular, women report feeling the effects of stress on their physical health more than men. The survey results seem to tie in with what research shows, that 43 percent of all adults suffer adverse health effects from stress. Given the potential health complications related to stress, it is fair to say stress certainly is a health problem in America.

The survey, conducted by the American Psychological Association (APA) in partnership with the National Women's Health Resource Center and iVillage.com, looked at how people deal with stress and its effect on mind/body health among women and men.

#### **Comfort Eating and Poor Diet Choices**

According to the survey findings, one in four Americans turns to food to help alleviate stress or deal with problems. Comfort eaters report higher levels of stress than average and exhibit higher levels of all the most common symptoms of stress, including fatigue, lack of energy, nervousness, irritability, and trouble sleeping. Comfort eaters are also more likely than the average American to experience health problems like hypertension and high cholesterol. In addition, 65 percent of comfort eaters characterize themselves as somewhat or extremely overweight and are twice as likely as the average American to be diagnosed with obesity.

- Stress levels are higher for frequent fast-food eaters. While only 13 percent of people who did not eat at a fast food restaurant in the last week are very concerned about stress, this number rises to 21 percent of among those who ate fast food meals in the past week.
- 31 percent of women say they are comfort eaters versus 19 percent of men.
- Men are more likely than women to opt for unhealthy snacks such as potato chips.

#### **Smoking and Inactivity**

People who are "very concerned" about their stress are more likely to be smokers. A quarter (27 percent) of those very concerned about their stress smoke every day, versus 19 percent of those "not at all" concerned with stress. Interestingly, forty-nine percent of single fathers and 31 percent of single mothers smoke three or more times a week. Americans who report they are "very concerned" about stress also exercise less. Roughly a third (36 percent) said they did not exercise in the last week, versus a quarter (27 percent) of those "not at all concerned" about stress.

"People who cope with long-term stress by engaging in unhealthy behaviors and lifestyle, may very well alleviate symptoms of stress in the short term, but end up creating significant health problems in the long run," says Russ Newman, PhD, JD, executive director for professional practice, APA.

### Women and Men Experience Stress Differently

Forty-seven percent of Americans say they are concerned about stress. Nearly half of Americans, especially women, parents, and people of working age, are concerned with the amount of stress in their lives. Women say stress affects them more than men do (51 percent versus 43 percent) and are more likely than men to report more things that stress them out. Women also express concern about how stress affects their lives more than men. Women dealing with stress report feelings of nervousness, wanting to cry, or lack of energy, while men talk about trouble sleeping or feeling irritable or angry. Women are more likely than men to report health problems related to stress such as hypertension, anxiety or depression and obesity.

### Stress Affects Mind/Body Health

Stress affects overall mind/body health. Adults who experience a great deal of stress rate their mental and physical health lower than adults who are not experiencing stress. People experiencing stress are more likely to report a number of specific ailments and symptoms.

- 59 percent report feeling nervous or sad
- 51 percent report symptoms of fatigue
- 56 percent report inability to sleep or sleeping too much
- 55 percent report lack of interest, motivation or energy
- 46 percent report headaches
- 48 percent report muscular tension
- 32 percent report frequent upset stomach or indigestion
- 37 percent report change in appetite
- 29 percent report feeling faint or dizzy
- 26 percent report tightness in chest
- 23 percent report change in sex drive

### What's Stressing Us Out

We have many sources of stress in our lives; stress is generally driven by work and money followed by health concerns and children.

### Leading Sources of Stress

- 59 percent say money
- 59 percent say work
- 53 percent say health problems affecting parents or other family members
- 50 percent say health concerns
- 50 percent say nightly news or state of the world today
- 48 percent say health of immediate family (spouse, partner or children)
- 41 percent say children

Twenty-eight percent of women call money a "very significant" source of stress, versus 19 percent of men. Twenty-seven percent of women worry about the health of a spouse or child, versus 20 percent of men, and 27 percent worry about health problems affecting parents, versus 20 percent of men. Twenty-four percent of women say children are a very significant source of stress in their lives, compared to 15 percent of men.

"Everybody experiences stress," says Newman. "The key is how effectively people deal with and manage stress. People who turn to comfort food or smoking are starting a vicious cycle. Their attempts to reduce stress can actually lead to health problems that result in increased stress."