

**CARDIOVASCULAR SYSTEM RESPONSES TO HYPOXIA: PHYSIOLOGICAL,
CELLULAR, AND MOLECULAR MECHANISMS**

Irgasheva Dildora Ganiyevna

Andijan State Medical Institute, Uzbekistan

Abstract: Stress represents a universal physiological response to internal or external stimuli that threaten homeostasis. The autonomic nervous system (ANS) plays a pivotal role in mediating both acute and chronic stress responses through coordinated regulation of the sympathetic and parasympathetic divisions. This article provides a comprehensive overview of the physiological mechanisms underlying stress and examines their effects on autonomic nervous system function. Particular attention is given to the interaction between the sympathetic nervous system, parasympathetic modulation, and the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal (HPA) axis. Acute stress responses are characterized by adaptive sympathetic activation that enhances cardiovascular performance, energy mobilization, and alertness. In contrast, chronic stress leads to sustained autonomic imbalance, marked by sympathetic dominance and reduced parasympathetic activity, which contributes to the development of cardiovascular, metabolic, and neuropsychiatric disorders. Understanding stress-related autonomic regulation is essential for identifying mechanisms of stress-induced pathology and for developing effective strategies aimed at restoring autonomic balance and maintaining long-term health.

Keywords: stress physiology, autonomic nervous system, sympathetic nervous system, parasympathetic nervous system, homeostasis

Introduction

Stress is an inevitable component of human life and represents a fundamental biological response to challenges that disrupt or threaten physiological equilibrium. The concept of stress was first systematically described by Hans Selye, who defined it as a non-specific response of the body to any demand placed upon it. Stressors may be physical, psychological, or environmental in nature, and their effects depend on intensity, duration, and individual adaptive capacity.

The autonomic nervous system is a key regulatory system involved in maintaining homeostasis during stress. It functions largely outside conscious control and regulates vital physiological processes, including heart rate, blood pressure, respiration, digestion, and thermoregulation. During stress exposure, the ANS rapidly coordinates bodily responses that prepare the organism to cope with perceived threats. While these responses are adaptive in the short term, prolonged or excessive stress can lead to autonomic imbalance and contribute to the development of various diseases.

Materials and Methods

This article is based on a narrative review of scientific literature related to stress physiology and autonomic nervous system regulation. Relevant studies were collected from peer-reviewed journals, physiology textbooks, and clinical research articles. Descriptive and analytical methods were applied to summarize the mechanisms of stress responses and to analyze the effects of

stress on sympathetic and parasympathetic activity. Both acute and chronic stress conditions were considered.

Results

The analysis demonstrates that stress activates the autonomic nervous system primarily through stimulation of the sympathetic nervous system. Acute stress leads to increased sympathetic outflow and reduced parasympathetic activity, resulting in elevated heart rate, increased blood pressure, bronchodilation, and enhanced energy mobilization. These changes constitute the classic “fight-or-flight” response and are essential for immediate survival.

In addition to sympathetic activation, stress is associated with activation of the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal (HPA) axis, which interacts closely with autonomic regulation. Elevated levels of stress hormones, such as cortisol and catecholamines, further modulate autonomic function and influence cardiovascular, metabolic, and immune processes.

Chronic stress results in sustained sympathetic dominance and impaired parasympathetic regulation. This autonomic imbalance has been linked to increased risk of hypertension, cardiovascular disease, metabolic disorders, and anxiety-related conditions. Reduced heart rate variability, a marker of autonomic dysfunction, is commonly observed in individuals exposed to prolonged stress.

Discussion

The findings highlight that the autonomic nervous system is a primary mediator of stress-induced physiological changes. While acute stress responses are adaptive and protective, chronic activation of stress pathways can have detrimental effects on health. Persistent sympathetic overactivity and diminished parasympathetic tone disrupt homeostasis and contribute to long-term pathological changes.

Understanding the interaction between stress physiology and autonomic regulation has important clinical implications. Interventions aimed at restoring autonomic balance, such as stress management techniques, physical activity, and behavioral therapies, may reduce the adverse effects of chronic stress. Furthermore, assessment of autonomic function can serve as a valuable tool in evaluating stress-related health risks.

Conclusion

Stress physiology involves complex interactions between neural and hormonal systems, with the autonomic nervous system playing a central role in coordinating adaptive responses. Activation of the sympathetic nervous system and suppression of parasympathetic activity enable the body to respond effectively to acute stressors. However, chronic stress leads to autonomic imbalance, increasing vulnerability to cardiovascular, metabolic, and psychological disorders. A comprehensive understanding of stress-induced autonomic responses is essential for improving prevention, diagnosis, and management of stress-related diseases.

Stress physiology involves complex and highly integrated interactions between the nervous and endocrine systems, with the autonomic nervous system serving as a central mediator of adaptive and maladaptive responses. Activation of the sympathetic nervous system during acute stress is a

vital survival mechanism that prepares the organism to respond rapidly to threatening situations by increasing heart rate, blood pressure, and metabolic activity. Concurrent suppression of parasympathetic activity allows for the efficient allocation of physiological resources during short-term stress exposure.

However, the findings emphasize that prolonged or repeated stress leads to persistent autonomic imbalance characterized by chronic sympathetic overactivity and diminished parasympathetic regulation. This dysregulation disrupts homeostasis and plays a significant role in the pathogenesis of numerous stress-related disorders, including hypertension, cardiovascular disease, metabolic syndrome, immune dysfunction, and anxiety and depressive disorders. Reduced heart rate variability observed under chronic stress conditions further reflects impaired autonomic flexibility and increased vulnerability to disease.

From a clinical and preventive perspective, understanding the effects of stress on autonomic nervous system function is of critical importance. Strategies aimed at reducing chronic stress and restoring autonomic balance—such as physical activity, behavioral interventions, relaxation techniques, and lifestyle modification—may significantly mitigate the adverse health consequences of stress. In conclusion, stress-induced alterations in autonomic regulation represent a key link between environmental challenges and disease development. Continued research in stress physiology and autonomic function is essential for improving diagnostic approaches, developing targeted therapies, and promoting resilience and long-term health in individuals exposed to chronic stress.

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