

mammalian, frequently encountered on college campuses, showing severe symptoms of stress.

Distinguishing characteristics include glazed stare, disheveled hair and clothing, sweaty palms and bitten fingernails. Subject should be approached with caution and treated with patience and understanding.

If you are plagued by headaches, stomach aches, and other mild but annoying ailments, you may be one of the all too common creatures crawling college campuses everywhere — a stressed-out student.

Surprised? You shouldn't be. The everyday pressures of college life are frequently manifested as physical problems in the typical student's body.

How emotions cause physical problems is a story that goes further back than the days of cavemen and sabre-toothed tigers. When faced with a crisis, those club-toting characters had only two choices — fighting or fleeing.

But in today's complex society, the solution isn't quite as easy. Social and cultural mores and restraints cause many of us to internalize feelings instead of resolving the problem.

Debbie Rabinowitz, a counselor with A&M's Student Counseling Service, says the stress reaction is very effective for short-term crises, but modern stresses are less immediate than running from a sabre-tooth tiger. Many people are in an excited state all the time and don't know they are under stress.

Although a certain level of stress is needed for people to work at their peak performance level, long-term stress causes

irritability, chronic anxiety and high blood pressure, Rabinowitz says.

When you are under stress your brain prompts your adrenal glands to secrete three hormones — cortisol, aldosterone and epinephrine.

These hormones prepare your body to face danger. Your heart rate increases, and more blood goes to your brain to stimulate thought processes. Less blood goes to your hands, feet and skin, causing you to feel cold and sweaty.

The stress response causes more than 1400 physical changes, including dilated pupils, heightened excitability, decreased antibody production and changes in the gastrointestinal system.

These physical reactions to stress are more evident during high-stress periods throughout the semester.

Dr. Claude Goswick, director of Texas A&M's student health center, says almost twice as many students report stress-related illnesses during peak exam times. Students complain of headaches, intestinal problems and nausea during this time, and many stress-related illnesses go unreported.

"It's hard for them to see or accept," he says. "But you absolutely can see the relationship."

Associate Professor Dr. David McMurray, of the medical microbiology and immunology department says stress lowers the body's ability to fight diseases.

"People are more susceptible to infections during periods of stress, especially during chronic stress," he says. "Stress can put

you at risk of contracting a cold or the flu."

Studies of medical students with pre-test anxiety and of people who have had a relative die recently show that stress can lower the immune system's ability to function, he says.

Goswick says the diseases students catch when they are under stress are usually not life-threatening.

"Headaches would be by far the most common single thing," he says. "Tension headaches probably represent as much as 80 to 85 percent of all headaches."

But for the most part, students who don't learn how to deal with stress are likely to develop ulcers and high blood pressure later in life, he says.

There is one stress-related problem that does threaten students lives — suicide. Goswick says the health center deals with two, three or more suicide attempts per week just before exams.

"Normally we just don't have those as a general rule," he says.

The best way to avoid stress-related illnesses is to learn to deal with stress positively, Rabinowitz says. The counseling service has several ways to help students do this, including biofeedback, relaxation tapes, individual counseling and group therapy.

Some students use overeating, alcohol and legal or illegal drugs to control stress, but she calls these negative strategies.

She recommends good nutrition, exercise and time management as better ways to deal with the dualistic legacy of the cavemen.

by **Yvonne DeGraw**

