Your top-to-toe
STRESS
ALERTS

Listen to your body – especially at this time of year. It could be telling you to slow down. Here's how to spot the signs...

You've got to get through your Christmas card list, buy the latest Nintendo Wii package for your kids before the shops run out, wrap the presents and prepare a Christmas dinner for all the family. These aren't exactly life or death situations, but your body doesn't know that. It perceives any stress – even the arrival of your mother-in-law or the pressure of making sure the turkey's in the oven on time – as a reason to prepare for fight or flight. And if, instead of running away or launching into attack (much as you may want to), you're stuck in the supermarket queue, the physiological changes that prepare your body for action can result in a range of symptoms you may not even associate with stress.

YOUR HEAD ACHES – ESPECIALLY AT THE BACK AND OVER THE EYES

'Expecting you to run or fight, the hormones released under stress trigger an increase in nervous activity to the muscles which causes them to contract. Having muscles squeezed tightly like this is painful,' explains Dr Malcolm VandenBurg, a medical expert with a special interest in stress management (www.malcolmvandenburg.co.uk). 'You need to switch off – and when you do, the muscles will relax and the pain will go. Help your head along by massaging your neck to release tension, and applying ice to your forehead.'

YOUR SINUSES FEEL BLOCKED

'If you have a stuffed-up nose, the membranes of your sinuses have swollen to protect you from infection. Because when you're stressed, your immune system is compromised,' Malcolm says. 'Olbas Oil or Sudafed, available from supermarkets and pharmacies, will help to dilate the sinuses.'

YOU'VE GOT HUMMING IN YOUR EARS

The muscles between the three small bones in our ears can tighten or relax to alter the sensitivity of our hearing. When our head muscles tighten under tension, our hearing can become so acute that we hear humming. Meditating or deep breathing exercises will help.

YOU'RE SUFFERING PALPITATIONS, CHEST TIGHTNESS OR BREATHLESSNESS

'Most people get palpitations when they're acutely stressed because their heart starts beating faster. Tightness in your chest is caused by your body trying to get more oxygen into your body, and this can make you feel breathless,' Malcolm explains. 'Relax with a deep breathing exercise. If your breathing becomes rapid and panicky, hold a brown paper bag over your face and breathe into this. It enables you to retain carbon dioxide and will slow down your breathing.'

YOUR TUMMY ACHES

'As the body is directing all its blood and energy to the leg muscles when you're out shopping, the stomach muscles get shut down and this can cause tummy ache,' says Malcolm. 'For all stomach-related problems, it's better to eat little and often and cut right back on alcohol, which multiplies symptoms by 20.'

YOUR SKIN FLUSHES OR COMES OUT IN A RASH

'The skin is the most sensitive organ to stress,' Malcolm says. 'The increased nervous action in the body causes histamine to be released more aggressively and this leads to blushing, eczema and psoriasis. If we were animals, our hair would be standing on end, or we would be changing colour – it's a very primitive reaction to danger.' The kind of antihistamines you use for hay fever can help, but the best remedy is to de-stress.

YOU HAVE TO RUSH TO THE LOO

Anticipating fight or flight, your bowels hurry to empty their contents, so you won't need a toilet stop while you're on the run. If nerves affect your tummy, keep a fast-acting diarrhoea remedy in your medicine cabinet.

YOUR EYES ARE TIRED

'Stress is a primitive response—our eyes become overactive, constantly focusing and refocusing—as if we're on the look out for danger. This causes them to become achey and sore, or even twitchy if we're very stressed,' says Malcolm. 'Make them more comfortable with cooling cucumber slices.'

YOUR MOUTH IS DRY

'The body is trying to close down the whole alimentary system (the parts concerned with digestion), so that you don't feel hungry on the run, and you will also produce less saliva which could be a hindrance,' Malcolm says. 'Modern stressful conditions can produce the same effect. Suck a lemon sweet to lubricate your mouth again.'

YOU'RE SWEATIER THAN USUAL

'Sweating is your body's way of trying to lower your temperature, because it's anticipating getting hotter as you swing into action,' says Malcolm. 'Your sweat is also smellier when you're stressed, as you're releasing pheromones to warn the rest of your tribe or family that danger is imminent'. Unfortunately, your body doesn't know the only danger is that someone else will get that last Christmas pud before you do. Arm yourself with deodorant.

SUPPER IS FOLLOWED BY HEARTBURN

'With the increased nervous activity, your muscle co-ordination goes haywire and the sphincters open when they're not supposed to. This causes acid reflux and heartburn in a lot of people,' Malcolm explains. Time your Christmas meal so that you won't be lying down afterwards. Going for a gentle walk is a good way to digest a rich meal.

YOUR HANDS AND FEET ARE COLD

'Your body is prioritising blood flow to the muscles, so that you're ready to start running, and this means diverting blood away from the hands and feet, which it perceives as less essential. The result is cold hands and feet,' Malcolm says. Ginger helps boost circulation and is a classic winter warmer.

YOU'VE GOT PINS AND NEEDLES

'These are another symptom of the body closing down its blood supply to the peripheral parts, seen as less important in the preparation for fight or flight,' says Malcolm. 'Resting with some deep breathing should help.'