

## Autonomic Nervous System

The autonomic system mainly controls functions over which we have less conscious control. These include the digestion of food, maintaining the blood pressure and heart rate, and much more. Its nerves leave the spine and connect to all the major organs and glands, either inhibiting or stimulating their activity (as opposed to the somatic system that is responsible for carrying motor and sensory information both to and from the central nervous system). This autonomic system has two branches. These are called the *sympathetic* and the *parasympathetic branches*.

**The Sympathetic Branch:** This activates the glands and organs that defend the body against attack. It is called the fight-or-flight system. Its nerves direct more blood to the muscles and the brain. The heart rate and blood pressure increase, while it decreases the blood flow to the digestive and eliminative organs. It also activates the thyroid and adrenal glands to provide extra energy for fighting or running away. Nervousness, stress or feelings of panic are what one feels when in a sympathetic state of readiness.

*The sympathetic system is catabolic, which means it tears down the body. Energy is used to prepare for defense, rather than for nourishment or for elimination of wastes. An excellent analogy is to imagine placing all the nation's resources in its military defense. While helpful in an emergency, if continued too long, the nation becomes much poorer for lack of productive commercial activity. The feeling of an 'adrenalin rush' is a product of the sympathetic system. It may feel good at first, but is always followed by a feeling of fatigue, as this system uses up energy and depletes the body.*

**The Parasympathetic Branch:** This is concerned with nourishing, healing, elimination and regeneration of the body. It is somewhat more *anabolic*, or concerned with rebuilding the body. Its nerves stimulate digestion, and the immune and eliminative organs. These organs include the liver, pancreas, stomach and intestines. The parasympathetic nervous system, when activated by rest, relaxation and happy thoughts, is essential for balanced living and for all healing.

Moving yourself into a healthy parasympathetic state and staying there as much of the time as possible helps heal all health conditions - both physical and emotional ones as well. The feeling often associated with the parasympathetic state can be one of lethargy or fatigue, as you are so relaxed. Do *not*, however, believe this is unhealthy. Rather, it indicates a state of repair and rebuilding in progress.

**Antagonism of The Sympathetic and Parasympathetic Branches:** *Only one or the other system can be active at a particular time.* The sympathetic branch powerfully inhibits the parasympathetic system. This is, of course, a survival mechanism because the emergency system, the sympathetic, takes precedence over the relaxation and healing. Thus, either one or the other is activated most all the time. To promote balance and healing, the goal is to keep the sympathetic system turned off as much as possible. This allows the maximum healing to occur. Simple ways to do this are to rest, relax and think happy thoughts or meditate. As soon as you think fearful or angry thoughts, or become too physically active, the body shifts into a sympathetic stance.

The other best ways to keep optimal balance are regular chiropractic adjustments and taking supplements to support the adrenal glands (our stress glands). Talk with us about which ones will be best for you.