



HealthCoach

Timely, trusted advice from Outer Banks Health



Cortisol Is...Normal!

When you hear “cortisol,” stress likely comes to mind. However, this hormone is your body’s natural response to stress, whether it is a joyful moment like welcoming a new baby or a stressful deadline. Stress is stress and your body reacts the same to any heightened situation. “Stress is a part of life. Notice it,” says Christina Bowen, MD, ABOIM, Dip ACLM, chief well-being officer at ECU Health and medical director at the Outer Banks Health Center for Healthy Living.

“Our body has the exact same reaction to stress whether it’s positive or negative. Cortisol triggers heightened energy and that’s normal.”

-Dr. Christina Bowen

In short bursts, cortisol is beneficial and essential for thriving in daily life. It helps you wake up, regulates blood sugar and metabolism, sharpens focus, boosts energy and keeps you alert. Bowen adds, “Our body has the exact same reaction to stress whether it’s positive or negative. Cortisol triggers heightened energy and that’s normal.” The challenge arises when stress levels stay elevated over time, preventing a full recovery.

Over time, constant elevated stress triggers low-level inflammation, known as metainflammation. Stress can affect all systems of the body, including the musculoskeletal, respiratory, cardiovascular, endocrine, gastrointestinal, nervous and reproductive systems. According to the American Psychological Association, this sustained fight-or-flight state increases risks for disease such as heart disease, type 2 diabetes, obesity,

depression and autoimmune flare-ups. Chronic stress can also interfere with sleep and emotional well-being. Sarah Summerton, FNP, director of team member health and well-being at ECU Health says, “Sometimes we don’t realize we are under chronic stress. It has just become a familiar pattern that our bodies accept as normal.”

Too often, people attempt to soothe stress with quick fixes like risky substances, including alcohol and tobacco, or even comfort foods, rather than attending to the underlying causes. The key is recognizing stress signals and intentionally dedicating regular time and care for recovery.

Short-term cortisol spikes are protective and adaptive. Recognizing when stress is productive versus when it becomes chronic enables us to adopt habits that support recovery, safeguard long-term health by lowering the risk of chronic disease and improving well-being. “We need to invite mechanisms that actually help us manage stress and recover from it, rather than mask it,” Summerton adds. Adequate, regular sleep, movement, diet and mindfulness practices support the body’s ability to reset. By paying attention to the body’s signals, such as headaches, tension, constant multitasking, trouble sleeping or persistent fatigue, we can recognize when to lower cortisol levels.

Thriving is not about eliminating stress; it’s about learning to respond effectively, care for the body, and honor the intrinsic signals it provides.

Hear from the experts.

During Thrive Month 2026, Dr. Christina Bowen and Sarah Summerton, FNP, explained how cortisol and stress affect the body at the popular “Don’t Stress...Thrive!” event.



With the busy summer months on the Outer Banks approaching, it’s the perfect time to take note of your stressors and fully own your self-care routines—for yourself, and for those around you. Scan the QR code or visit ThriveOBX’s YouTube to learn from the experts some practical strategies for recovery, staying healthy and preventing lifestyle-related diseases.



Christina Bowen, MD, ABOIM, Dip ACLM



Sarah Summerton, FNP

May/June 2026

Education, Support and Community Events

Skin Checks

Join us for free skin checks with Joyce Smith, DNP, NP-C. Simply wear loose, comfortable clothes and get a thorough skin health check in just ten minutes. To secure a spot, use the QR code to register. Questions? Call 252-449-9183.

Saturday, May 2 | 10 a.m. – 1 p.m.

Outer Banks Dermatology | 2405 S Croatan Hwy, Nags Head



Prenatal Yoga Class

Led by certified prenatal yoga teacher Anna Oprea, PA-C, this is an all-levels class, free for any gestational age. Mats and props will be provided. If you have a high-risk pregnancy, please have approval from your prenatal provider before attending. To register, scan the QR code.

Mondays: May 4, 11, 18 & June 1, 8, 15, 22, 29 | 5:30 p.m. - 6:45 p.m.

OBH Seahorse Room | 4810 S Croatan Hwy, Nags Head



Stroke Support Network

Outer Banks Health offers a free support group for stroke survivors and caregivers. For more details and to register, contact Robin South, RN, at 252-449-4554 or by email at robin.south@outerbankshealth.org.

Tuesdays: May 5 and June 2 | 11 a.m. - noon

OBH Medical Office Building, Port Room or Virtual | 4810 S Croatan Hwy, Nags Head

Childbirth Education Classes

OBH offers a two-part series of classes covering topics related to pregnancy, birth, postpartum, newborn care and breastfeeding. Registration is required. For more information, scan the QR code or email Emma.McClain@outerbankshealth.org.

Wednesdays: May 6, 20 and June 3, 17 | 5 p.m. – 7:30 p.m.

OBH Medical Office Building, Port Room | 4810 S Croatan Hwy, Nags Head



Wellness Screenings

OBH offers free wellness screenings, including blood pressure, heart rate, cholesterol, blood sugar, BMI and A1C testing, along with health coaching. Walk-ins are available; appointments are recommended and prioritized. Screenings will take place on the Health Coach vehicle in the parking lot. Scan the QR code to schedule. Questions? Call 252-449-9183.

Wednesday, May 13 | 10 a.m. – 1 p.m.

Town of Southern Shores | 5375 N Virginia Dare Trl, Southern Shores

Wednesday, May 20 | 10 a.m. – noon

Town of Kill Devil Hills | 102 Town Hall Dr, Kill Devil Hills

Wednesday, June 3 | 10 a.m. – 1 p.m.

Corolla Library | 1123 Ocean Trl, Corolla



Support for Cancer Patients and Their Caregivers

A cancer diagnosis can be overwhelming for everyone. That's why OBH offers free support groups for those affected. For more information and to register, please contact Janet Creef, LCSW, at 252-449-2314 or by email at janet.creef@outerbankshealth.org.

Coping with Cancer Support Group

Wednesdays: May 13 and June 10 | 11 a.m. - noon

Breast Cancer Support Group

Wednesdays: May 20 and June 17 | 11 a.m. - noon

Caring for the Caregiver

Wednesdays: May 27 and June 24 | 11 a.m. - noon



May 15



June 13

The Blood Connection Blood Drives

Walk-ins are welcome; appointments are recommended and take priority. To make an appointment, scan the QR codes or go to thebloodconnection.org. All donors will receive an e-gift card. Outer Banks Health team members, please present your badge upon arrival.

Friday, May 15 | 8 a.m. – 1 p.m.

Outer Banks Health | 4800 S Croatan Hwy, Nags Head

Saturday, June 13 | 10 a.m. – 3 p.m.

Outer Banks Family YMCA | 3000 S Croatan Hwy, Nags Head



Thrive With Us

ThriveOBX™ is a vibrant community movement grounded in the proven connection between well-being and longevity. Research shows 30% of our longevity is tied to our genetics, 10% is access to essential health care services, and the remaining 60% is within our control. ThriveOBX is inspiring well-being through trusted guidance, practical tools and engaging programs rooted in the Thrive5®.



Learn more at ThriveOBX.com

Family & Friends CPR

Join us for a Family & Friends CPR Course led by Becca Eilert, RN and trained with the American Heart Association. This course teaches the lifesaving skills of adult Hands-Only CPR, adult CPR with breaths, adult AED use, and mild and severe airway blocks. CPR for children and infants may be included if time allows. Skills are taught by using the AHA's practice-while-watching technique, which allows participants to practice on a CPR training manikin while skills are demonstrated in the course video.



Tuesday, May 5 | 5:30 p.m. – 6:30 p.m.

OBH Seahorse Room | 4810 S Croatan Hwy, Nags Head

Advance Care Planning

Join us for a free, informative session on advance care planning. If you only need witness or notary assistance, please arrive 10 minutes before the session ends. Questions? Call 252-475-0905.

Wednesday, May 6 | 10 a.m. – 11 a.m.

Virginia Tillett Community Center | 950 Marshall C Collins Dr, Manteo

Wednesday, May 6 | noon – 1 p.m.

Baum Senior Center | 300 Mustian St, Kill Devil Hills

Wednesday, June 3 | noon – 1 p.m.

Baum Senior Center | 300 Mustian St, Kill Devil Hills

Education Series: Power Over Anxiety

Join Janet Creef, LCSW, and learn how to manage anxiety; and how it can become a positive tool for growth and effectiveness. Scan QR code to register.



Wednesday, May 6 | 3 p.m. – 4 p.m.

OBH Cowell Cancer Center | 4927 S Croatan Hwy, Nags Head

FIT Colon Cancer Screening

Individuals aged 50-75 will be offered an at-home fecal immunochemical test (FIT) kit used to screen for colon cancer. Kits can be picked up; individuals must attend the Monday event to receive individual results. Screenings will take place on the Health Coach vehicle. Scan the QR code



to reserve your spot. For more information, call 252-449-9183.

FIT Pickup: Friday, May 15 | 10 a.m. – 1 p.m.

FIT Drop-off/Screening: Monday, May 18 | 10 a.m. – 1 p.m. Baum Senior Center | 300 Mustian St, Kill Devil Hills

Namaste at the Beach

Join us on Thursdays for free, tranquil yoga classes on the beach at Byrd Street in Kitty Hawk and Jennette's Pier in Nags Head. Weather permitting, this offering is designed for men and women of all skill levels. Bring a yoga mat or towel and your water bottle. No RSVP needed. Questions? Call 252-449-4529.



Thursday Evenings: May 14, 28 | 5:30 p.m. – 6:30 p.m.

Byrd Street Beach Access, Kitty Hawk (parking available)

Thursday Mornings: June 4, 11, 18, 25 | 7:30 a.m. – 8:30 a.m.

Jennette's Pier, Nags Head

Power of Art Expression Workshop

Thanks to a Community Benefit Grant from Outer Banks Health, Dare Arts provides FREE workshops (including supplies) for cancer patients, caregivers and survivors. Space is limited and registration is required. Visit DareArts.org/workshops, email DareArtsInfo@gmail.com or call Dare Arts at 252-473-5558 to reserve your spot.

Wednesdays: May 20 and June 17 | 2 p.m. – 4 p.m.

Cowell Cancer Center Education Room | 4927 S Croatan Hwy, Nags Head

Stroke Awareness Walk

You're invited to participate in the 5th Annual Stroke Awareness Walk to celebrate those who have been affected by stroke and learn about the hospital's stroke program. We will also be partnering with Manteo High School, combining our efforts with their Mental Health Walk.

For more information, please call 252-449-4529.

Saturday, May 16

Registration 9 a.m.; Walk 9:30 a.m.

Manteo High School Track | 829 Wingina St, Manteo

