



Too Stressed to Eat Well?

Is life so stressful that your eating habits are “going down hill?” Maybe it is time to take some action!

Stress is a fact of life – not just in the 21st century but even during cave-dwelling times. Some stresses are positive, such as finishing a 10K race. But often the things that cause us stress tend to be unpleasant – worry, fear, and anger. These stresses are the most harmful to our health.

Poor Eating Habits Increase Stress

Nutrition and stress are closely related and one jeopardizes the other. For example, a deficiency of a nutrient is a stress in itself; the deficiency places a strain on all the metabolic processes that depend on that nutrient. If someone is deficient in iron, the result is a reduced oxygen supply to body tissues and the brain; this can leave someone feeling tired, irritable, and unable to concentrate.

Stress Increases Your Nutrient Needs

Stress can affect your nutrient needs by reducing absorption, increasing excretion, altering the use of, or stepping up the daily requirements for certain nutrients. The problem is that most people find that their eating habits are at their worst during high stress.

Healthy Foods Can Help

How well your body handles stress depends on if it is well nourished before and during stressful periods or events. A well nourished body deals with stress better than a poorly nourished one.

When a body is stressed there are greater demands on nutritional needs, yet this is usually the time when people resort to eating too much or they forget to eat at all! Stress can set off biological mechanisms that can turn off the desire to eat. Part of the “fight or flight” reaction to stress is that blood sugar is elevated and digestion slows down, hence hunger is suppressed.

The flip side is that many people will resort to overeating as a way to escape stress or to relax. If you find that this has been happening for a long period of time, it may be time to re-evaluate your life and make changes. Overeating becomes a red flag that lets you know that something isn't right in your life.

Until you can make some changes to reduce your stress it helps to choose foods that will nourish your body and perhaps your soul.

Chew Stress Away

For some people, crunching away on crispy foods can temporarily relieve some tension. If you crave crunchy, salty foods, go for ones that are lower in fat and calories. Healthy options include microwave low fat popcorn, baked tortilla chips with salsa, or veggie sticks with a low fat dip.

Soothe Stress Away

If you crave sweet foods, reach for fruit, caramel flavoured rice cakes, raisin toast, or low fat rice pudding. The carbohydrates in these foods may help stimulate the release of serotonin, the brain chemical that calms and soothes.

Comfort Foods - Forget the Stress

We all have certain foods that make us feel good. Many comfort foods are ones that remind us of our childhood - foods that our parents gave us to make us feel better.

Luckily, many comfort foods can be healthy choices if they are made in low fat ways or eaten in smaller amounts. It's important to realize that eating comfort foods, although temporarily soothing, will have no long-term impact on solving your stress.

Stress Proofing Your Life

Recognize that some stress is a fact of life. The best defence is to arm yourself with some healthy lifestyle habits.

- Eat a nutrient-packed, low fat, high fibre diet, including breakfast. Get a copy of Canada's Food Guide and follow it!
- Eat at regular meal times – don't skip meals.
- Try to make your mealtimes relaxed and pleasant. Plan ahead to avoid filling up on unhealthy choices.
- Stress vitamin and mineral supplements do not help you deal with emotional stress. These supplements will not give you more energy or make up for poor eating habits.
- Watch your caffeine intake; limit yourself to no more than four 6-ounce cups of coffee a day. Better yet, get into the habit of drinking decaffeinated coffee or tea during stressful periods.
- Get active; people who exercise regularly cope with stress much better.
- Get at least seven hours of sleep a night.
- Take up meditation, yoga, or other relaxation techniques.
- Avoid using alcohol, tobacco, or drugs to deal with stress.
- Talk to a counsellor if you need to.