

Nutrition Matters

Nutrition Services, York Region Health Services

Stress and Nutrition



The birth of a baby, a divorce, a promotion, exams, a traffic jam... the list goes on. Whether life's events are worrying or exciting, they often bring along stress. Stress can motivate us to try new things and to reach our goals. But too much stress can make us feel tired, depressed and even ill.

Some people respond to stress by overeating, while others can't eat a bite. If you're stressed for a long time, your health can suffer, especially if you're not eating well. You may have trouble sleeping, gain or lose weight, or experience indigestion such as diarrhea or constipation.

Can nutrition help?

How well your body handles stress may depend on if it is well nourished before and during times of stress. Yet this is usually the time when people either eat too much as a way to escape stress or they forget to eat. Healthy eating won't get rid of stress in your life but it can help you cope better with stress.

Nutrition tips to help handle stress

- **Eat a nutrient-packed, low-fat, high-fibre diet**
You can do this by following Canada's Food Guide

- **Eat regularly**
Have three small meals plus a couple of snacks every day. Don't skip meals. Include foods from three or four of the food groups at every meal



- **Make mealtime relaxing**
Set time aside throughout the day to eat nutritious meals and snacks. Chew your food slowly and enjoy the taste. This will help avoid indigestion. You may also find that you will feel satisfied with eating less food, which is good if you tend to overeat
- **Cut down on caffeine**
Caffeine is a stimulant found in coffee, tea and colas. If you regularly consume a lot of caffeine, cutting down may help you feel calmer when under stress. Limit yourself to 2 to 2½ cups (16-20 oz) of filter-drip coffee a day. Women who are pregnant or who are planning to become pregnant, should limit themselves to 1½ cups (12 oz) of coffee a day. To help you sleep better, avoid caffeinated foods and beverages late in the evening
- **Choose foods high in carbohydrates**
When you are under stress, choose foods high in carbohydrates and low in protein such as fruit, dry cereal,

pasta with tomato sauce, raisin toast, or a bagel with jam. The carbohydrates in these foods may help stimulate the release of serotonin, the brain chemical that calms and makes you sleepy

What if stress has caused you to lose your appetite?

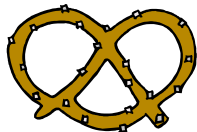
Sometimes when we are under stress, we are either too rushed to think about food or too overwhelmed to care. Stress may affect your appetite, but skipping meals puts extra stress on your body. Eat small amounts of healthy foods more often. Make sure you have snacks close at hand. Some ideas are yogurt, low-fat cheese and crackers, fruit or hard-boiled eggs.

What can you do about stress-eating?

Some people tend to overeat when they are stressed. “Comfort foods” are often the foods that they reach for. If the comfort foods you eat tend to be less healthy choices, eating a lot of them could lead to health problems.

Luckily, many comfort foods can be healthy choices if they are made in low-fat ways or eaten in smaller amounts. Try some of these low-fat, snack foods that may satisfy your “need” to eat:

- fresh fruit or veggies
- pretzels
- low-fat yogurt
- air popped or light microwave popcorn
- hummus and pita bread
- baked tortilla chips and salsa
- whole grain cereal and low-fat milk
- hot chocolate made with low-fat milk



Eating comfort foods may provide temporary relief, but is not a long-term solution to dealing with stress. You may want to try other activities instead of eating to combat stress.

Other stress fighting tips

- Be active. Regular exercise will burn calories, relieve stress and increase your sense of well being. Do something you enjoy such as walking, skiing, gardening or jogging
- Take up meditation, yoga or other relaxation techniques
- Crank up the stereo and dance around the living room
- Take a long bath or shower
- Get enough sleep. Stick to a schedule and don't sleep late on weekends
- Share your feelings. Talking to a friend or family member can help you feel better



What about stress supplements?

It's a common myth that our bodies need more nutrients when we're under stress.

Although pressures at home or work sometimes cause people to neglect eating well, we do not use any more or less nutrients while under stress. Physical stress, such as when recovering from surgery or sickness, would call for paying special attention to our nutrition needs. Purchasing supplements or other products that are promoted to relieve stress is unnecessary.

