

How to Take a Bite Out of Stress

Food and Stress

Food shouldn't be a source of stress. In fact, food should be one of your best stress-busting allies. Our bodies use food to help affect our ability to respond to a moment's tension or a long-standing stress. Some foods can make us jumpy, while other foods can steady our energy and equip us to handle challenges as they arise.

And yet no one food could be labeled "best stress-buster". By eating a healthy and balanced diet, you give your body almost everything it needs to function well under pressure. That said, there are a few foods you should try to add to your diet to help you work through the tension.

Complex Carbohydrates

When stress strikes, your body may crave carbohydrates. Eat carb-filled foods and your body creates *serotonin*, which sends good-mood messages to your brain. To get "carb calm" you need to eat complex carbohydrates, like whole grains. Complex carbs are digested more slowly than simple carbs found in sugary foods.

If you eat sweets, any "carb calm" you feel will be cancelled out by the surge of insulin that will lower your blood sugar and make you feel hungry again. Slow carbs will keep you full longer, too, so you won't have to stress over hunger pangs or digestive dramas.

Stress less snacks: Fill up on fibre-rich foods like oatmeal or whole-grain breads, rice, and pasta to help you stay calm, cool and collected. Try starchy sweet potatoes, crunchy carrots, baked beans, or just about any green vegetable.

Vitamin C

Give your daily diet a vitamin C boost to balance your body's output of stress hormones. Some studies show that with enough vitamin C during tense times, your body may be able to slow down the production of *cortisol*. That's the chemical stuff of stress that sends us into that "fight-or-flight" frenzy we experience when challenged or threatened. Cortisol is good for our bodies in healthy doses, but too much cortisol on a regular basis can make us more vulnerable to depression, learning and memory difficulties, and physical illness – all sources of further stress.

Stress less snacks: Oranges aren't the only source of C in the bushel. Papaya bursts with vitamin C, as do strawberries, cantaloupe, and kiwi fruit. Munch on raw bell pepper, a sprig of parsley, or steam some greens like broccoli, Brussels sprouts, or kale.

Healthy Fats

Fat is usually the bad guy, but when you're stressed out, fat can be your friend. If you trim the fat during lean times, you leave yourself vulnerable and ill-equipped to handle stress. In one study, women put on a low-fat diet experienced swings in their mood, showing more irritability than the group on a normal-fat diet.

Don't go for any old fat though. Since stressful times boost your body's cortisol levels, any excess calories you eat can quickly turn to unhealthy belly fat. Instead, opt for healthier fats, like those found in foods rich in omega-3 fatty acids. These fats may help support your body with a steadier attitude towards stress.

Stress less snacks: Net the benefits of omega-3s by eating more oily fish, including salmon, mackerel, herring, and light tuna. If fish isn't your thing, omega-3 fatty acids can also be found in walnuts, flaxseed, beans, tofu, and olive oil. Monosaturated fats are another healthier choice. Creamy avocados will give you the fit fat, along with other nuts like almonds, cashews, and peanuts.

B Vitamins

A body under stress pumps out cortisol which then borrows from the body's vitamin storage to power all of those dreaded stress symptoms. Fight back against cortisol by stockpiling B vitamins. This complex of vitamins – including folate, niacin, and riboflavin – supports the nervous system.

Stress less snacks: Feast on green leafy vegetables and whole grains, and you'll meet most of your body's B requirement. Getting B6 and B12 can be tricky for vegetarians and vegans, as these nervous system supporting vitamins are mostly found in animal products. If organ meats, fish, liver, eggs, poultry, and milk are not on the menu, try adding brown rice and soybeans or taking supplements.

Magnesium

Reacting to stress takes a lot of energy: Along with B vitamins, our bodies also use up magnesium. This mineral has lots of jobs in our bodies, including maintaining proper nerve and muscle function and keeping bone and teeth healthy.

Having too little magnesium means our nerves can get overexcited, which leads to muscle tension, cramps, and weakness. Our heart rate can also increase, our blood sugar can become unstable, and our blood pressure can be elevated. Add headaches into the mix, and you have a

potential stress management disaster. On the other hand, a body coursing with enough magnesium will enjoy relaxed muscles and healthy nerve function.

Stress less snacks: Munch on a handful of raw pumpkin seeds for a mega-boost of magnesium. Grab some sunflower and sesame seeds while you're at it. Again, green leafy vegetables pack a stress-busting punch, especially spinach and Swiss chard.

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