

Stress and Nutrition



“Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you what you are.”

Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, French gastronome (1755–1826) and author of *The Physiology of Taste*

“Don’t dig your grave with your own knife and fork.”

English proverb

“Stressed spelled backwards is desserts. Coincidence? I think not!”

Anon

Increasing numbers of us are now getting serious about reducing our stress levels. Paradoxically, however, it can get quite stressful just figuring out where to start. Yoga, meditation, exercise and dance classes, seminars, self-help books and countless different therapies all clamour for our attention.

There’s so much that we could be doing, we sometimes overlook the most basic stress-reduction strategy of all; taking a good look at what we’re eating.

It is well documented and scientifically proven that mood and food are deeply intertwined, yet many people continue to eat badly (or at least not as well as they could) and still wonder why they’re feeling tired, irritable and perpetually stressed.

No matter what your circumstances, you can take responsibility for what you eat and drink. It’s not necessarily easy, but with a little effort you can begin to make gradual changes that over time will amount to a real difference.

In fact, giving your body the nutrition it needs could be the biggest step you ever take towards a calmer, more stress-free life. If you’d like to discuss any of the issues raised in this Helpsheet, the **CiC 24-hour Confidential Care Adviceline** is available for practical and emotional support.

Craving and consumption

Our bodies and our brains require certain nutrients to function at optimal levels. So it follows that if we don't supply the right kinds of nutrients at the right time, things are going to start going a bit wrong. It also follows that if we put the wrong kinds of substances into our bodies, we're going to start finding the going a bit tough.

So far so simple, but there's a catch. When we get stressed and tired, our bodies begin to crave substances that make us feel better in the short-term, such as coffee, pastries, crisps and pies. Continued consumption of these, however, will end up making us feel much, much worse.

The chemistry of stress

So how does it work? First, we need to understand exactly what stress is. Put simply, our bodies have evolved to respond to danger or perceived threat by triggering the so-called Fight or Flight response. This is a reaction which releases various stress hormones into our system, including adrenalin and cortisol, which equip us to respond to the threat.

Stress hormones give the body a burst of energy and strength by speeding up the heart beat, pushing blood flow into major muscle groups, and dumping sugar into our bloodstream to give us the energy to take vigorous action.

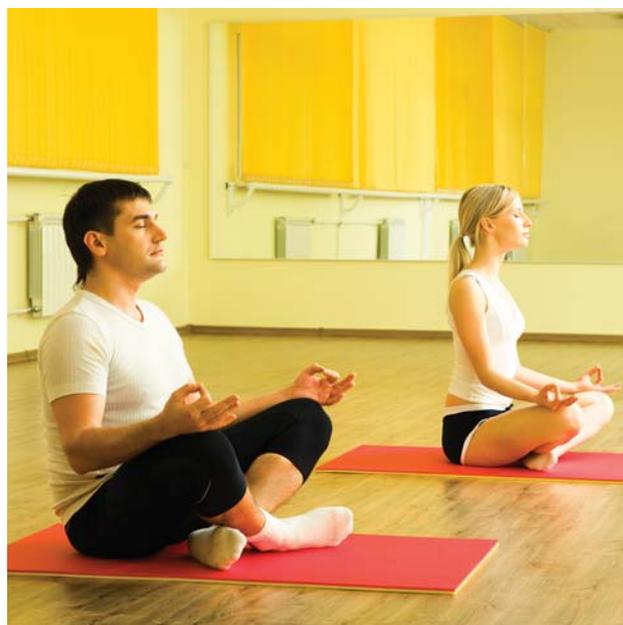
And here's where the trouble starts. Our caveman ancestors needed the Fight or Flight Response to defend themselves against wild beasts. This kind of immediate, vigorous physical exercise worked off the stress hormones and returned their bodies to a normal state of rest.

These days, however, the sources of stress have changed somewhat. Our stress response is more likely to be triggered by a broken photo-copying machine or an unexpected traffic jam than a stampeding mastodon. The trouble is, our bodies still release all the same chemicals. And because our lifestyles are so much more sedentary, we don't metabolise the hormones through physical activity.

As the stress builds, we look for ways to keep us going. Our blood sugar levels spike immediately following a stressful event but then fall sharply. If the stress then continues, we'll start looking for alternative sources of energy. This is where we start reaching for chocolate bars and ice-cream. Nicotine and caffeine will also give us a quick boost as they trigger the release of further adrenaline into our system. The boost

Because we feel bad, we'll feel more stressed, which means we'll be even more likely to reach for even more of the food that we shouldn't be eating. And on it goes. Busy modern lifestyles don't help much either, leaving people little time to prepare healthy nutritious food.

You might skip breakfast, eat a sandwich and packet of crisps at your desk at lunch-time and pick up a takeaway on your way home at night. It's easy and it's fast, but ultimately you'll pay a heavy price.



may be quick, but it leaves us feeling even more tired than we were in the first place.

Sharply fluctuating blood sugar levels have been proven to have a significant impact on mood. They lock the body into a chronic cycle of boom and bust, in which we find ourselves constantly trying to fight off fatigue with ever larger amounts of toxic substances. And of course, the more you consume, the more you can tolerate and the more you end up needing. (Not only does refined sugar have no nutritional value, it actually robs your body of much needed nutrients.)

Eventually, your body will begin to give up on you. The adrenal glands, which manufacture cortisol, can become exhausted and stop functioning properly. Without sufficient cortisol, even basic tasks can become draining. This kind of chronic stress can have a profound psychological impact,



leading to anxiety, nervousness and even depression. On the physiological front, it can lead to high blood pressure, heart disease, chronic headaches, weight gain, sleep disturbance, digestive disorders, and even cancer.

The following symptoms indicate that you are exhausting your system:

- Decreased ability to handle stress
- Lethargy and lack of motivation and focus
- Weight gain (especially around the waist)
- High frequency of flu and other respiratory diseases
- Reduced sex drive
- Lightheaded when rising from a laying down position
- Lack of energy in the mornings and in the afternoon between 3 and 5 pm.
- Brief burst of energy after a meal
- Need for coffee or stimulants to get going in the morning.
- Craving for salty, fatty, and high protein foods such as meat and cheese.

Practical steps

- 1. Know where you stand.** It's pretty hard to make meaningful changes to your diet if you're not really aware of what you're eating. Try keeping a food diary for a week; that means writing down everything that you eat and drink. You might be surprised by what you discover, especially in terms of the number of sugary snacks or cups of coffee that you consume.
- 2. Take it gently.** Trying to revolutionise everything overnight normally ends in failure. Pick one or two small changes you can make and work up from there. It's worth remembering the 80:20 rule. If you eat the right foods 80 percent of the time, you can allow yourself a bit of what you fancy for the remaining 20 percent. It takes a lot of the pressure off!
- 3. Drink water.** If you do nothing else, start by drinking more water. It's vital for hormonal function, blood sugar balance and the elimination of waste. Aim for six to eight glasses of filtered water a day.
- 4. Eat breakfast.** Even if you can only manage a piece of fruit, eat something first thing in the morning. Skipping breakfast immediately puts your body (and mind) under stress. Bear in mind also that a sugary pastry and strong cup of coffee will certainly get you going, but you'll crash a couple of hours later. A bowl of porridge and some fruit is ideal.
- 5. Eat regularly.** Try and consume smaller amounts of food at more regular intervals during the day. Your body won't be able to absorb the nutrients of a huge meal late at

night if there's been precious little else going in during the day. Nuts, oat cakes, bagels and crisp bread are all good standbys. Eating little and often is a very effective way of keeping blood sugar levels stable.

6. **Cut down on coffee and alcohol.** Watching what you drink can make a massive difference to your stress levels. Stimulants such as coffee and depressants such as alcohol may feel energising or relaxing, but they put extra strain on your system and rob you of important nutrients.
7. **Get your five a day.** Almost all of us know by now that we should be eating five portions of fruit and vegetables a day. For some this is easy, but it can seem almost impossible for others. Remember to start gently. If you can only manage two, don't worry. Start by adding some fruit to your breakfast cereal, and work up from there.
8. **Keep it whole.** Whole foods are, quite simply, unprocessed foods that you buy in their most natural form, such as fresh fruit and vegetables, legumes, pulses, nuts and seeds.

9. **Get some exercise.** Numerous studies have established that moderate physical exercise is a highly effective way of relieving stress. If you're going to make some changes to your diet, why not feel really good about yourself and start getting a bit more active as well. The two together will almost certainly make a profound difference to your mood.

10. **Get some support.** Qualified nutritionists can help you explore the links between stress and the food that you are eating. They can also recommend nutritional supplements that can help you on your way. If you feel that you are really losing your battle with stress, it could be time to talk over the underlying issues with a therapist or psychotherapist. Also, if your relationship to food has become compulsive (through binge eating, starving or purging) it is critically important that you talk to a qualified mental health professional (see below) before it poses a serious threat to your health.

Books

The Food Doctor: Healing Foods for Mind and Body (Paperback)

By Vicki Edgson and Ian Marber

The Depression Diet

By Theresa Cheung

Improve Your Mood with Food: A Guide to Fighting Fatigue, Anxiety, Stress, and Depression Through Food (Paperback)

By Alexandra Massey

Further help and information

CiC – Supporting Organisations

www.well-online.co.uk

24-hour Confidential Care Adviceline,
providing emotional and practical support.

