

## Nutrition and Stress

*Moving to a new home, a divorce, changing jobs, exams, money, a traffic jam...the list goes on. Many of life's events often bring along stress.*

Stress can motivate you to try new things and to reach our goals. But too much stress can make you feel tired, depressed and even ill.

Stress is the emotional and physical strain you feel as you adjust to changes in your life. Your health can suffer if you're under stress for a long time, especially if you are not eating well. You may have trouble sleeping, gain or lose weight, or experience indigestion, diarrhea or constipation.

### Eating well can help

How your body handles stress may depend on how well it's nourished before and during times of stress. Sometimes people respond to stress by eating too much food. Others forget to eat at all.

If you have poor eating habits, your body will have a harder time fighting infections and illness. Healthy eating won't get rid of stress in your life, but may help you respond well to stress.

If eating healthier feels like a big challenge, focus on small changes. Taking small steps can motivate you to add a few more. Build on them and over time you will see big results, such as more energy to enjoy life and to cope with stress. Think about the small changes you can make today.



### Nutrition tips to help handle stress

- **Eat a nutrient-packed, high fibre diet**  
Choose more whole grains, vegetables, fruit and legumes (beans, lentils and tofu). Use Eating Well with Canada's Food Guide to help you pick healthier foods.

- **Eat regularly during the day**  
Eat three small meals plus healthy snacks every day. At every meal, include foods from three or four of the food groups (Vegetables and Fruit, Grain Products, Milk and Alternatives and Meat and Alternatives).

Even when on the go, choose a healthier meal such as fruit, yogurt and a whole grain bagel.

- **Slow down and relax at mealtime**

Take the time to sit down for meals and snacks. Eat slowly and enjoy the taste. Learn true hunger and fullness. Eat when you are hungry and stop when you are satisfied.

- **Cut down on caffeine**

Caffeine is found in coffee, tea, cola beverages, chocolate and some medications. Some

people are more sensitive to caffeine and may feel irritable and nervous, get headaches, or have trouble sleeping.

If you regularly consume a lot of caffeine, cutting down may help you feel more calm when under stress. Limit yourself to 2 to 2 ½ cups (500 mL - 625 mL) of filter-drip coffee a day (less if you are breastfeeding, pregnant, or planning to become pregnant).

### • **Drink water often**

Water quenches your thirst and helps you feel full, which can curb the urge for caffeine or stress-related eating.

## **Stress and appetite**

Sometimes when you are under stress, you may be too busy or overwhelmed to think about food. Stress may affect your appetite, but skipping meals is not good for your body.

Eat smaller meals more often. Prepare healthy snacks that are ready when you need them. Some ideas are lower fat cheese and whole grain crackers, fresh fruit or hard-boiled eggs.

## **Stress and overeating**

Some people overeat when they are stressed. Many reach for foods such as cookies, cakes and chips. If the foods you eat are higher in fat, sugar, or sodium, eating a lot of them may lead to health problems.

Even with healthier snacks, be aware of how much you eat. Think about why you are eating as well. Is it because you are hungry? While it is okay to eat to fight stress sometimes, choose other activities instead.

Take a step towards eating healthier snacks by trying these more often:

- raw vegetables
- fresh fruit
- whole grain crackers
- low fat yogurt
- lower fat cheese

- air popped popcorn
- hummus and whole wheat pita
- whole grain bagel or pita with vegetables and lower fat cheese
- baked tortilla chips and salsa
- whole grain cereal and low-fat milk
- chickpea and cherry tomato salad



## **Activities to help fight stress**

- Be active. Regular physical activity will improve your mood, relieve stress and may make you feel better. Do something you enjoy, like walking, skating, dancing, biking, gardening or jogging.
- Mediate, try yoga or other relaxation activities.
- Listen to your favourite music.
- Read a magazine or book.
- Take a long bath or shower.
- Get enough sleep.
- Share your feelings. Talking to a friend, family member or trusted professional can help you feel better.
- Write it down. If you've got something on your mind, writing it down is one way to help organize your thoughts.

## **Supplements and nutrient needs**

Your body doesn't need extra nutrients when you are under emotional stress. However, if you eat poorly or eat very little, your body may not get enough nutrients. If you have questions about taking vitamin and mineral supplements, talk to your doctor or a registered dietitian.

