



Nutrition Fact Sheet

Food To Fuel The Mind

A well balanced, nutritious diet can be extremely beneficial in assisting stress management by improving brain functioning, immunity, reducing toxins from the body and lowering blood pressure. In this fact sheet we explore the importance of healthy eating during times of stress and in particular, which foods may provide the most benefit during these times.

HOW DOES STRESS AFFECT THE BODY?

When we encounter something stressful, our nervous system and adrenal glands send signals to the body to prepare for the 'fight or flight' response, and give less priority to less urgent functions such as digestion. In addition to this, long term stress in particular releases a hormone known as cortisol which increases appetite and can lead to overeating. This is why when individuals are feeling stressed, snacking tends to increase.

Studies have also found that during times of stress, people tend to reach for foods which are higher in sugar. The brain uses glucose (sugar) as its most important source of fuel, and in total utilises approximately 20% of the body's daily carbohydrate requirements. However, when the brain is stressed, it requires more energy again, which leads to individuals craving sugary treats.

The body is designed to be able to handle short term stress, however if stress persists over a long period of time, these responses of craving sugary foods and overeating can lead to weight gain. This then can affect a multitude of other physiological functionings such as immunity and blood pressure.

WHICH FOODS ARE BEST TO CHOOSE DURING TIMES OF STRESS?

- **Whole grain carbohydrates** - Carbohydrates have been shown to increase serotonin in the body. This chemical works to boost mood and reduce stress. While not all carbohydrates are created equally, it is important to choose the right type of carbohydrate to get this benefit. Complex carbohydrates work to keep energy levels stable by taking longer to digest which can improve mood and reduce stress. These types of carbohydrates include whole grain bread, oats, pasta and yoghurt.
- **Oily fish** - Stress can place extra pressure on the heart, therefore consuming foods which can improve heart health and mood are beneficial. Omega-3 is rich in oily fish such as sardines and salmon. One study in particular found that sardines may help to reduce overall stress, anxiety and depression.
- **Water** - Dehydration can increase cortisol levels which can contribute to stress. Individuals generally require between 6-8 cups of fluids per day, with the majority of this ideally coming from water.



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- **Nuts** - Nuts can be beneficial during stressful times due to being highly satiating and aiding to reduce any unhealthy cravings. Nuts are rich in both protein and fibre, both of which help to keep you feeling fuller for longer throughout the day. Be sure to only consume a small portion however (approximately 30g per day) due to being high in calories, and therefore when consumed in excess can lead to weight gain.
- **Bananas** - Bananas are rich in both dopamine and magnesium, both of which will drop in the body during times of stress. Bananas also contain a good amount of B vitamins which help the nervous system to run effectively, whilst also being rich in potassium which is beneficial in managing blood pressure levels.



WHICH FOODS SHOULD BE LIMITED DURING TIMES OF STRESS?

- **Caffeine** - An occasional cup of coffee will have little effect upon stress levels but try to reduce the amount of coffee consumed later in the day. The caffeine can keep you awake and interfere with consistent sleeping patterns.
- **Processed food** - Processed food generally contains higher levels of fat, sugar and/or salt. Salt in particular can further increase blood pressure which is usually already at a higher level during times of stress.
- **Refined sugar** - Sugar can cause blood sugar levels to fluctuate which can lead to a quick and significant reduction in energy levels. In addition to this, when sugar levels drop quickly, it can also increase cravings for sugary foods. Therefore, limiting refined sugars in the first place can prevent this cycle from happening and keep energy levels more stable to help during the time of stress.

References -

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