Fighting stress with food

Can certain foods help us better cope with stress? Yes…and no. In times of extreme stress, our bodies release hormones that activate our sympathetic nervous system that then stimulate the adrenal glands to release adrenaline and noradrenaline. Our hearts pound as oxygenated blood is redirected to the muscles, preparing our bodies to either fight or flee the threat. At such times, bodily functions not related to fighting or fleeing are temporarily put on hold – including the absorption of nutrients.



However, if our bodies are already well-nourished, we can better weather these intense periods of stress, as well as life's daily challenges; if we are lacking in certain nutrients we are less able to do so. For example, a lack of protein, iron, B vitamins, vitamin D and magnesium each contribute to increased fatigue, anxiety and moodiness. So instead of reaching for the potato chips, pudding or pie, incorporate the following foods into your diet:

1. **Spinach** contains magnesium, which helps improve your body's response to stress and may help reduce migraines or headaches.
2. **Oatmeal.** Carbs help you produce serotonin, a calming hormone that helps fight anxiety's negative effects – which is probably why many of us crave them when we are stressed. Indulge your craving but choose a healthier option, such as oatmeal. It is high in fibre, which means that your body will absorb it slowly, prolonging the serotonin boost and making sure your blood sugar is in check.
3. **Asparagus** is high in folate, which produces serotonin and helps stabilize mood.
4. **Turkey.** That sleepy feeling you get after eating Thanksgiving dinner is due to the amino acid tryptophan found in turkey. Tryptophan signals the brain to release the feel-good chemical serotonin, which promotes calmness and even fatigue.
5. **Milk**, including **skim milk**, is high in antioxidants and vitamins B2 and B12. It also provides you with protein and calcium, which can reduce cramps, muscle spasms or tension and soothe premenstrual syndrome (PMS) for women.
6. **Nuts and seeds** cure many cravings because they are salty and crunchy. They also contain vitamin B12, magnesium, and zinc. Almonds also provide vitamin E, which, like vitamin C, fights stress-related free radicals that cause heart disease. Walnuts and pistachios are known to lower blood pressure. Sunflower seeds include folate, which helps produce dopamine, a pleasure-inducing brain chemical. Cashews are a good source of zinc – low levels of zinc have been linked to both anxiety and depression. Since our bodies have no way of storing zinc, it is important to get some every day. Toss a handful into your stir-fry!
7. **Berries**. Blueberries have some of the highest levels of an antioxidant known as anthocyanin, and they have been linked to all kinds of positive health outcomes, including sharper cognition. But all berries, including strawberries, raspberries and blackberries, are rich in vitamin C, which has been shown to be helpful in combating stress.
8. **Oranges** are rich in vitamin C, which is known to lower blood pressure and the stress hormone cortisol.
9. **Fish containing omega-3 fatty acids**, such as salmon, can help reverse stress symptoms by boosting serotonin levels. An omega-3- rich diet can also help suppress the production of the anxiety hormones cortisol and adrenaline.
10. **Avocados** contain lutein, beta-carotene, vitamin E, B-vitamins and more folate than any other fruit.
11. **Chocolate.** Yes, even chocolate can help relieve stress – but make it dark. High in flavonoids, which are lauded for their relaxing properties (chamomile tea is another great source), chocolate also contains phenethylamine, a chemical that enhances your mood. Try chocolate that is 70 percent cacao or higher.

The key to a nutritious diet – including the items above – is moderation and reasonable consumption. Remember, there is a threshold which can be crossed – when consuming too much of a good thing!

Only half the battle

While a healthy diet prepares your body for stressful situations, it is only half the battle. Together, as a combination with healthy eating, try to also:

- **Exercise.** Regular exercise is one of the best ways to manage stress. Even a brisk walk at lunchtime is a good start.
- **Find ways to relax.** This can include deep breathing exercises, meditation, massage, yoga, tai chi or just quietly reading.
- **Make sleep a priority.** Sleep provides essential rejuvenation time so no matter how busy you are, do not sacrifice a good night's rest.
- **Do not self-medicate.** Do not try to cope with your fatigue, lack of energy, or anxiety with alcohol, sedatives, stimulants, nicotine or other substances. These will only worsen your stress in the long run.
- **Reduce your caffeine intake.** Studies have shown that caffeine can increase levels of stress hormones.
- **Have fun!** Laughter really is the best medicine and can help you find perspective.

Nutrition support available to you

As a final note, your diet can strongly affect your mood, health and energy levels. However, maintaining a healthy, well-balanced diet can be a challenge with a hectic schedule and multiple personal and family demands. Through your Employee and Family Assistance Program's nutrition support service, you can work with a Registered Dietitian who is focused on your health and goals. Connect with one of our Registered Dietitians for advice about:

- Weight loss/gain
- Lowering cholesterol levels
- Getting off the diet "roller coaster"
- Reducing high blood pressure
- Boosting energy
- Regulating diabetes
- Healthy eating on the go
- Preventing heart disease
- Accommodating shift work
- Preventing osteoporosis
- Eating a well-balanced vegetarian diet

You can arrange a consultation over the telephone or receive a health and wellness resource kit if you prefer to work through the material on your own. Request this service online through Online Access or First Chat, or directly on your mobile device through My EAP app.