

# STRESS

*And Your*

# DIET



The Complete Guide To The Right And  
Wrong Foods For Optimal Stress Management

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# Stress Kills

There are many events and circumstances that can trigger chronic stress, from poor finances to long-term illnesses and bad relationships. As cortisol courses through your body, it creates inflammation and leaves you completely exhausted.

If you feel like you are at death's door most of the time it's probably because you really are. Stress *does* kill.

When it comes to the nervous system, the brain reacts and changes in line with its environment and experiences. This is truer during childhood than in any other time. This is because key areas of the brain are still developing. This is why extreme stress in childhood can result in mental health issues in life and a form of PTSD that doesn't respond as other types of PTSD do to medications and therapy.

In fact, almost half of anxiety disorders have been linked to trauma in childhood. According to Columbia University, orphans who have spent their earlier years in care experience a physical change in their amygdalae, leaving it abnormally large. This can persist even after they are removed from care and placed in foster care or with an adoptive family (Prolonged institutional rearing is associated with atypically larger amygdala volume and difficulties in emotion regulation, Tottenham, et al).

The cardiovascular system can take a serious hit from chronic stress as it steeply increases the risk of heart disease and stroke. According to the American Heart Association, although scientists may not know for sure *why* this is stress can be riskier to your heart health than smoking, high blood pressure, and overeating. Additionally, experiencing the shock of a sudden stress can weaken the heart rapidly. The loss or death of a partner can be disastrous to heart health; this is because there



is a sudden and intense surge of cortisol through the body. This is what is referred to when people say that someone died of a broken heart.

As for the digestive system, it is in regular communication with your brain so stress is linked to gastrointestinal problems. Patients who have IBS often experience high levels of cortisol and they are also more likely to suffer from anxiety and depression.

According to the American Psychological Association, 33% of people say that stress impacts their mental health strongly, while 30% say it had an impact on their physical health.

Of course, stress also impacts the immune system, metabolic system, and even your cells, but what about your sleep? Cortisol's job is to regulate your body's sugar levels. During the day the levels of the stress hormone will vary, however, they are generally at their highest in the morning hours and then drop steadily over the day before building up again while you sleep. Patients under stress and who suffer from depression experience abnormally high levels of cortisol.



# Stress Pitfalls Related To Diet

There are a few common pitfalls that stress brings which are related to your diet. Are you guilty of skipping meals, giving into your cravings for fatty, sugary foods, or do you rely on caffeine to give you a boost when you're particularly low? You are not alone. It is something that we all do when we are under stress, often unconsciously.

When your stress levels are high you often struggle to sleep properly which increases your probability of making bad diet choices, as fatigue is often disguised as hunger and cravings for junk. Even though you experience a crash afterward, you still go back for more because you know it's the quick and easy way to get a lift that you desperately need.



## Meal Skipping

By skipping breaks and meals, you're putting *more* stress on your body by allowing your blood sugar levels to drop. If you're already stressed out, you're simply compounding the stress. Your adrenal glands support you during stress, and if they are particularly strong, you'll probably escape too much punishment if you skip a meal or two (on occasion).

However, if they have become fatigued as a result of chronic stress then you're putting even more stress on them by missing meal times. Your adrenal glands also happen to secrete that stress hormone (cortisol) and help maintain glucose levels. It all goes to work against you when you are under stress and heaping more stress on your system.

The best thing you can do to counteract this is having healthy snacks handy at all times. That way if you miss a meal you can at least fuel up on a healthy snack like nuts. It's not the ideal option, but it helps.

## Fatty, Sugary Foods

You already know that foods, which are packed with sugars and fats aren't good for your health. It's especially true when you're under stress.

Unfortunately, this is when you are most likely to crave these foods and it's difficult to overcome those cravings when you are at your lowest (both mood wise and energy levels). All you're doing by indulging these cravings is giving yourself a false high and you will then suffer the crashing lows that come with it.



## Caffeine

Yes, caffeinated beverages are delicious and coffee happens to have a wide variety of health benefits. However, overindulging on caffeine is only going to feed your stress levels. Just like those fatty, sugary foods, you will get the initial boost, which will be followed by a crash.

## Stress Eating - Eating Behind Stress

The hormones that stress unleashes often push people to overeat and it's always the worst types of foods, too.

This may explain why it's common for those dealing with chronic stress to gain weight. In fact, it should come as no surprise that in a survey from the American Psychological Association over 50% of Americans report *high* levels of stress.



If you don't deal with chronic stress think about the time you have been extremely stressed out. You probably had difficulty sleeping, you may have smoked more than normal or picked up the habit,

you very likely increase your alcohol intake, started drinking more caffeinated beverages, and there's every chance you overate fatty and sugary foods at every chance.

Stress can end your appetite in the short-term, but over the long-term, your cortisol level is essentially jammed at the on switch. Therefore, even though the stressful situation is gone and your cortisol levels should return to normal they haven't, they're still elevated, wreaking havoc.

- Stress tends to dictate your food preferences, too, and sadly, countless studies have found that experiencing distress will cause you to seek foods that are high in sugar, fat, or both. When stress dictates your diet, affects your sleep, leaves you less likely to exercise, and increases your alcohol intake it is no wonder that people gain weight during times of chronic stress.



- Gender may also play a role with women being the more likely to seek comfort in food, while men are more likely to pick up cigarettes and drink alcohol. Additionally, a study from Finland indicates that women are more likely to suffer from obesity as a result of stress eating than men (Psychosocial factors at work and obesity among young Finish adults: a cohort study, Jääskeläinen, et al).

If you are guilty of snacking on unhealthy foods because of stress then there are some steps you can take to help curb this nasty habit. You may be surprised to see how much weight you lose just by making these small changes.

- Start exercising regularly. Not only will it distract you from the need to snack but a low-intensity workout will decrease your cortisol levels. You'll also experience a life in mood and you can curb the temptation to give into your cravings. Of course, this will also help you on the weight loss front.

- Yoga/Meditation. We know that these are excellent for reducing stress levels. They also contribute to improved mental health and mindful meditation can help guide you to make healthier food choices.
- Social network. Having a strong social network can provide you with a buffer from the stress. This is because a strong support network improves your mental health.



## Foods That Elevate Stress

Therefore, you know now that there are a variety of habits that can increase your stress levels, and stress is more likely to have you turning to unhealthy options. What foods, though, are the worst for elevating your stress levels?

- Caffeine. Too much caffeine can increase your stress levels greatly. That doesn't mean you have to give up your morning cup of coffee, *but* if you constantly have a cup on the go then it could just be increasing your stress levels. The reason for this is that caffeine is a stimulant for your nervous system, which can result in a steep rise in blood pressure and a rapid heartbeat. It can also dehydrate you, leaving you with headaches, and affect your sleep, which will leave you exhausted. Please note: coffee shop hot drinks are the absolute worst for stress because they contain so much additional sugar that the crash they bring is so steep your only option is to have another caffeinated beverage just to find balance.
- Alcohol. You might think a nice drink will help you relax, but the truth of the matter is that it's feeding your stress. Again, it's stimulating the production of stress hormones and the two simply feed off of each other. It can also interfere with your sleep, so it's best to avoid a drink before bed.
- Refined Sugars. There are no nutrients in sugary foods, they are what we refer to as *dead* foods. They have no value whatsoever. They are designed to taste good and hook you – which they do very well. As delicious as they may be you can expect mood swings and sugar crashes following the very brief highs.



- Sodium. Foods that are high in sodium cause you to retain fluid and bloat. That may not sound like such a big deal but it adds more pressure to your heart and increases your blood pressure. This feeds your stress and leaves you fatigued.
- Confectionery Goods. We all love home baking and when we hit the coffee shop and spot a glazed donut looking back up at us it can be difficult to resist. There's a problem with these types of snacks, though, because they don't contain fiber the sugar burns quickly increasing your glucose levels and boosting your stress. Sugar needs a fiber friend to allow for a slow burn.
- Potato Chips & Pretzels. If you think you're good because you don't have a sweet tooth – think again. Potato chips are packed with trans fats which is the one type of fat you should exclude from your diet altogether! It's guilty of increasing belly fat, which is a serious health risk. Pretzels may seem harmless but they are simple carbs, which means they provide a mood boost and a major crash thereafter.
- Granola Bars. A lot of people pick up granola bars and pat themselves on the back for picking the healthy snack option. Sorry to be the one who breaks it to you, they're just as naughty as candy bars. Read the labels before you choose the “healthy” option of *any* type of food. It's simply a well-disguised lie.



- Deep Fried Foods. It's truly awful how much of the foods we find delicious are terrible for us. Come fair and festival season the temptation to indulge in deep-fried foods is *overwhelming*. Whether it's a Snickers bar, Twinkies, or mac and cheese balls. They are packed with trans fats, carbs, and are going to fuel a fatty stomach and increase your risk of depression while they're are it. You may be thinking that you don't indulge in these types of food often, but... French fries, mozzarella sticks, zucchini... don't fool yourself, and partially hydrogenated oils are *everywhere*.



- Ice cream. Is there anything more comforting than ice cream when you've had a bad day or gone through a nasty breakup? Sitcoms would tell us no, but your health has a different opinion. Sadly, ice cream creates a serious spike in cortisol and glucose levels and it's a lot of lactose, which can have dire consequences for those with sensitivities.

- Chinese food. It's a firm favorite in so many households across America; unfortunately, there are plenty of carbs and additives in it to enhance the flavors. You're better off creating your own Chinese meals at home where you can control the ingredients.



- Soda Pop. Diet soda is a wise option than the regular stuff, which is so filled with your sugar you can probably feel your teeth rotting with every sip. However, even diet soda isn't great. It has an impact on good bacteria in the gut and can actually increase your risk of diabetes and obesity. If you're a regular soda drinker and don't think you can let go make the switch to diet and go from there. Diet soda drinker?

Start to cut back and wean yourself off of it. Replace it with water and infuse it with cucumber and sprigs of mint for a bit of flavor.

- Cocktails. Okay, we already mentioned alcohol but cocktails truly deserve their own paragraph. Why? Well, in addition to their alcohol content they are also laden with sugar. The big problem here is that you never have just one cocktail because they're just so easy to drink. The next time you peruse the cocktail menu quietly remind yourself that just one comes with a hit of 500 calories.



- Nachos. A favorite snack whether at the ballgame or at the bar, it seems like it can't be *that* unhealthy if you just choose wise toppings but sadly, that's a lie. Cheese is always a must when it comes to nachos and that's a hit that won't help you relax no matter how delicious they are.

- Artificial Sweeteners. Did you think we wouldn't mention them since we covered sugar further up the page? Sorry to disappoint you, they're not a great choice either. The most common sweeteners are guilty of blocking serotonin production, which can result in headaches, mood swings, and insomnia. Where possible, avoid sugar *and* sweeteners. It may take some getting used to but you can enjoy iced tea, hot tea, and coffees without the additions.



- Fast Food. Okay, so it is delicious, it's easy, and it's often fairly cheap. Here's the problem with it – that cheapness is only true in the short-term. In the long-term it's damage to your health can become incredibly expensive. Not only does it impact your physical health, but it can also have a negative impact on your mental health, too. According to Public Health Nutrition, regularly consuming fast food increases the risk of depression by over 50%. You can still enjoy the occasional fast food treat, but making it a regular thing is detrimental to your overall well-being.
- Trans fats. We mentioned above that trans fats are a giant no-no in your diet. They came to fruition back in the 1950s, suddenly finding a home in boxed baked goods, fried foods, and even margarine. As well as increasing your risk of depression, they are guilty of clogging your arteries thus increasing your risk of stroke and heart attack. We know that the Mediterranean diet is a healthy option and it utilizes a lot of olive oil and includes *no* trans fats whatsoever.
- Wheat Bran. Wait, what? I know, it's something the experts have told us is great for that additional fiber content. Unfortunately, when it comes to stress and anxiety it sends it haywire thanks to the content of phytic acid. It prevents your body from adequately absorbing zinc and other minerals. Zinc is a pretty important nutrient for people who tend to suffer with stress, anxiety, and depression.
- Tofu. Can you hear vegans everywhere collectively moaning in disgust? Unfortunately, tofu is soy based and while it's a great source of lean protein, it contains enzymes that make digesting that lean protein nearly impossible. Additionally, soy contains high levels of copper, for someone who is already prone to stress and anxiety this will only fuel the issue. Another problem is that causes flatulence – that may not sound like the worst problem, but many





people with chronic-stress and anxiety also suffer from digestive issues so the last thing they need is flatulence and bloating.

- Whole-wheat Bread. While the gluten-free craze may have gone over the top many people forget that it is a problem for a lot of people. Those with celiac disease often struggle with anxiety and that stress problem can disappear once they remove gluten from their diet. Even those who don't have celiac disease can be sensitive to gluten, so don't judge someone who has cut gluten from their diet. If you are fond of gluten but you are constantly stressed make the change and see what happens, you may find that there's a change in just a few days.
- Canned Soups. It may remind you of your childhood when you were home sick, but you're better off making your own soups at home. Not only are they cheap and easy to make, but you can store them in the freezer in individual portions and defrost when necessary. The problem with canned soup is the container contains Bisphenol A (better known as BPA) and it is known for affecting the brain's ability to stabilize moods. Why? It alters the genes in the part of your brain that mediates stress.
- Apple Juice. Why is fruit juice so bad for you when fruit isn't? Fiber. The fiber allows you to process the sugar slowly, but when you drink it in a juice, it creates such a spike in your blood sugar that cortisol floods your system and it can induce a panic attack. Of course, there's also the tiny problem that many of the apple juices on the market test positive for the presence of arsenic. This toxin can increase anxiety and stress and exacerbate the symptoms of depression. So, steer clear of any beverage that has been sweetened.

# Foods That Help Stress And Reduce Related Risks

We've covered the types of foods that will exacerbate your stress levels, but what about foods that have the opposite effect and reduce stress levels?

- It's a confirmed fact that chronic stress compromises immunity, so make sure to eat a highly nutritious diet, which includes nutrient dense foods like vegetables and other high-fiber choices. The nutrients these foods offer help fortify your body and protect against immunity deficiencies brought on by chronic stress. According to, Heather Mangieri, RDN and spokesperson for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, green leafy vegetables are some of the best choices as spinach for instance contains high amounts of folate that produces dopamine, a pleasure neurotransmitter in the brain that helps keep you calm..
- Asparagus. Okay, so it may be the cause of some potent urine – *but* asparagus is packed with folate, which is known for its ability to keep you calm, cool, and collected. The best part about it is that there are many ways you can eat them, whether it's on their own, in a salad, or with cottage cheese. Better yet, you can steam it, broil them, grill them, and more!
- Oatmeal. This slow burning breakfast food is the perfect comfort food. It stimulates your brain to produce the feel-good chemical serotonin and keeps you fuller for longer as it provides a slow burn. It's sure to help you stave off stress and stay focused throughout your morning.
- Magnesium is known to help alleviate fatigue and irritability, which often accompany chronic stress. Sunflower seeds, flax and pumpkin seeds are good sources of this key mineral.



- Avocado. This delicious healthy fat helps you beat stress. It's packed with folate, vitamins B and E, and beta-carotene.
- Oranges. The ultimate example of vitamin C and super easy to eat on the go. Feeling stressed? Eat some citrus fruits and wash it down with a glass of water.
- Berries. Whether you prefer blueberries, raspberries, or strawberries you can get plenty of vitamin C from your berry hit. The good news is that vitamin C is seriously helpful when it comes to beating stress. When they're not in season, keep them portioned in the freezer so you can toss them in smoothies.
- Fatty fish. According to, Lisa Cimperman, RD, and spokesperson for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, salmon, tuna, and other fatty fish contain omega-3 fatty acids that have anti-inflammatory properties to counteract the negative effects of stress hormones, adrenaline, and cortisol.
- Cashews. We mentioned how great nuts are for a healthy snack. They are chock full of protein, healthy fats, and cashews just happen to be an excellent source of zinc, which a deficiency of has long been linked to depression and anxiety. Garlic. It might smell quite powerfully, but it's better for just keeping vampires away. Garlic is packed with antioxidants and is effective in neutralizing cancer causing free radicals. It also fights cancer, heart disease, the cold, and boosts the immune system. That last bit is particularly important because one thing stress does is completely destroy your immune system.
- Walnuts. Cashews aren't the only powerhouse nut; walnuts offer a flavor punch *and* a healthy hit of omega 3 fatty acids, too.



- Chamomile. There's a reason this is such a great option for bedtime. It really does help relieve stress and induce sleep. More than that, though, it's great for relieving the symptoms of anxiety, too. It's time to include it in your nighttime routine and if you don't have one yet – start with a cup of hot chamomile tea.



- Green Tea. It does have traces of caffeine in it, but it also contains theanine, an amino acid that is known to boost mental performance and help fight various forms of cancer.

- Dark Chocolate. It's effective for a decrease in blood pressure, which increases feelings of calm. It also contains antioxidants like flavonols and polyphenols. That doesn't mean you should eat it on the daily, but don't be afraid to treat yourself.

- Beef. Not just *any* beef, beef from cows that have been grass fed. It's great for the environment and it's better for you. It contains more antioxidants than beef from cows that were fed grain and you can rest assured that there are no added chemicals, drugs, and what not. It also contains less fat and contains omega 3 fatty acids. It's not only stress free steak, but it's guilt-free, too!



- Oysters. Not *just* an aphrodisiac – if you're a fan of shellfish then a serving of just six is the perfect way to get half the zinc you need for your day. Of course, you'll get the best from them if you avoid the breaded and baked/fried versions and stick with them served on ice with a squeeze of lemon.

## Final Thoughts

Stress may be an inevitable fact of life, but you don't have to allow it to reach chronic levels before you make changes to relieve it. You may not be able to change your job or the events that are causing your stress, but you can manage your stress levels by looking at your diet and determining what food items you regularly consume that might be fueling your stress.

Start cutting out those foods that exacerbate stress and start embracing the foods that will help relieve it. That doesn't mean you have to kiss goodbye to your favorite foods, it simply means you need to increase the healthy items that make up your diet and handle the others as true treats.

Stress truly does kill, it has such a severe impact on your body and overall well-being, and it is vital that you take the symptoms seriously and remedy the issues immediately.