

NUTRITION MATTERS

STRESS AND NUTRITION

Stress can be brought on by many aspects of our daily life, through both worrying and exciting circumstances. Stress is the body's response to a real or perceived threat, designed to engage our body's "fight or flight" response. Stress can be positive; it can motivate us to try new things and to reach our goals. But too much stress for too long can make us feel tired, depressed and even ill.

People respond differently to stress. For people with underlying mental health issues such as anxiety or depression, managing stress can be even more challenging. Stress can cause an increase or decrease in appetite. You may have trouble sleeping and concentrating, experience indigestion, diarrhea or constipation, muscle aches, headaches or high blood pressure. It may also lead to more chronic health issues.

How well your body handles stress may depend on if it is well nourished before and during times of stress. Healthy eating will not get rid of stress in your life but it can help you cope better.

Nutrition tips to help you manage stress

- ✓ **Eat nutrient-packed meals and snacks.** Enjoy well-balanced meals by following [Canada's Food Guide](#). Nourish your mind with good nutrition including a mix of:
 - Vegetables and Fruit
 - Whole grains
 - Nuts and seeds
 - Beans, peas and lentils
 - Lean meats and poultry
 - Fish
- ✓ **Eat regularly.** Don't skip meals. Plan for three meals and if needed, a few snacks in between.
- ✓ **Make mealtime relaxing.** Set uninterrupted time aside, distraction free, throughout the day to eat your meals and snacks. Chew your food slowly and enjoy the taste. This will help avoid indigestion and help you listen to your body.
- ✓ **Keep hydrated.** Drink water regularly throughout the day. Other drink options include milk, unsweetened fortified plant-based beverages and herbal teas.
- ✓ **Cut down on caffeine.** Caffeine is a stimulant found in coffee, tea and some colas. If you regularly consume a lot of caffeine, cutting down may help you feel calmer when under stress. Limit yourself to about 2 to 2½ cups (16 to 20 oz) of coffee a day. To help you sleep better, avoid caffeinated items late in the evening.
- ✓ **Limit alcohol.** While alcohol can seem to make you more relaxed in the short term, if you are regularly drinking more than the recommended guidelines, you could end up making stress harder to deal with in the long run. Drinking less is better. Follow [Canada's Guidance on Alcohol and Health](#).

PUBLIC HEALTH

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THE IMPACT OF STRESS ON EATING

Stress can affect your appetite and eating habits. Sometimes when we are under stress, we are either too rushed to think about food or too overwhelmed to care. Some people may lose their desire to eat while others may crave food for comfort. Continuously skipping meals or overeating puts extra stress on your body. It may help to eat smaller amounts of foods more often to balance your nutrient needs.

Snack ideas

- Yogurt with fruit
- Whole grain crackers and cheese
- Veggies with hummus or a bean dip
- Air-popped popcorn with a handful of nuts
- Whole grain cereal with milk or yogurt
- Homemade trail mix (e.g., nuts, seeds, whole grain cereal and/or dried fruit)
- Mini muffin and milk
- Piece of dark chocolate and berries
- Fruit smoothie

BUILDING RESILIENCE AND POSITIVE STRESS MANAGEMENT TIPS

- ✓ Be active. Physical activity can help you reduce stress and improve your mood
- ✓ Participate in calming activities such as meditation, yoga, deep breathing or mindfulness
- ✓ Listen to music, read a book, take a bath. Doing hobbies or activities you enjoy can help give you a break from problems when you can't deal with them right away
- ✓ Bring family or friends together to prepare and enjoy a meal
- ✓ Get enough sleep. Build in a consistent routine that provides you with enough sleep to feel well rested and energized. Most adults need 7 to 8 hours of sleep per night.
- ✓ Talk to a friend or family member
- ✓ Go outdoors. Enjoying nature has been shown to lead to positive thinking

SHOULD I TAKE A VITAMIN OR MINERAL TO HELP REDUCE MY STRESS?

It is important to focus on food, not supplements to get the nutrients you need. Supplements are not an alternative to a healthy, varied diet. If you have questions about your body's needs, speak to your primary care provider or a registered dietitian.

SUPPORT

If you are struggling to cope, sometimes professional support may be beneficial and needed. Check to see if your employer has an employee assistance program or talk to your primary care provider. Ask for help if your stress won't go away, if it is affecting your functioning at work, school or home, and if you are experiencing increased distress and emotional difficulty.

Community Organizations and Resources

- [Canadian Mental Health Association](#)
- [Center for Addictions and Mental Health](#)
- [Canadian Center on Substance Use and Addiction](#)
- [UnlockFood](#)
- [York Region Public Health - Parenting](#)
- [York Support Services Network](#) or call 1-855-310-COPE (2673)

To speak to a Registered Dietitian at no cost, call Health Connect Ontario at 8-1-1.

Join our online [mailing list](#) to keep informed of nutrition programs, resources and/or campaigns. For more information contact nutritionservices@york.ca.