

NUTRITION MATTERS

STRESS AND NUTRITION

Traffic, running late for an appointment, a new job, a family illness, the list goes on. Whether life's events are worrying or exciting, they often bring stress. Stress is the body's response to a real or perceived threat. Stress is designed to engage our body's "fight or flight" response. It can motivate us to try new things and to reach our goals. But too much stress can make us feel tired, depressed and even ill.

People respond differently to stress. For people with an underlying mental health issue such as anxiety or depression, managing stress can be even more challenging. Stress can cause an increase or decrease in appetite. If you are stressed for a long time, your health can suffer. You may have trouble sleeping, gain or lose weight, experience indigestion, diarrhea or constipation.

CAN HEALTHY EATING HELP?

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.

Nutrition tips to help you handle stress

Eat nutrient-packed meals and snacks. Try using the [Eat Well plate](#) to plan a well-balanced meals including ½ plate of vegetables and fruit, ¼ plate of whole grains and ¼ plate of protein foods.

Eat regularly. Don't skip meals. Plan for three meals and a few snacks in between.

Make mealtime relaxing. Set uninterrupted time aside, distraction free, throughout the day to enjoy your meals and snacks. Chew your food slowly and enjoy the taste. This will help avoid indigestion and help you listen to your body.

Cut down on caffeine. Caffeine is a stimulant found in coffee, tea and 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're regularly drinking more than the recommended guidelines, you could end up making stress harder to deal with in the long run. Canadian [low-risk drinking guidelines](#) recommend no more than 10 drinks per week (2 per day) for women, and no more than 15 drinks per week (3 per day) or less for men. There are more effective ways to cope with stress than drinking too much alcohol.

PUBLIC HEALTH

1-877-464-9675
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york.ca/nutrition

WHAT IF STRESS HAS CAUSED YOU TO LOSE YOUR APPETITE?

Sometimes when we are under stress, we are either too rushed to think about food or too overwhelmed to care. Stress may also affect your appetite, but skipping meals puts extra stress on your body. Eat small amounts of healthy foods more often. Some ideas are yogurt with fruit, whole grain crackers with hummus or a bean dip, whole grain cereal with milk or yogurt.

WHAT CAN YOU DO ABOUT STRESS-EATING?

Some people tend to overeat when they are stressed. Common comfort foods include sweet treats and high fat snacks but eating too much of them could lead to health problems.

Tips for managing cravings

- To prevent becoming too hungry, avoid skipping meals or going too long between eating. When over hungry, the tendency is to reach for less healthy, convenience foods
- Keep healthy snacks available for when you start to feel hungry
- Eat a small portion of what you crave to satisfy you. For example, buy the food you are craving as an individual portion, to reduce the chance of going back for more

Eating comfort foods may provide temporary relief, but this is not a long-term solution to dealing with stress. Try other activities instead of eating to reduce stress.

BUILDING RESILIENCE AND POSITIVE STRESS MANAGEMENT TIPS

- Be active. Physical activity can help you reduce stress and improve your mood.
- Participate in calming activities. Meditation, yoga, deep breathing and mindfulness can help calm your mind.
- 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 a common myth that our bodies need more nutrients when we are under stress. We do not use any more or less nutrients while under stress. Vitamin and mineral supplements do not reduce stress. If you have questions about your body's needs, speak to your primary care provider or a registered dietitian.

SUPPORT

Sometimes professional support may be beneficial. Ask for assistance if stress has been present for a period of time and:

- Stress is affecting your functioning at work, school or home
- You are experiencing increased distress and emotional difficulty
- See if your employer has an employee assistance program

Community organizations:

- Canadian Mental Health Association (www.cmha.ca)
- Center for Addictions and Mental Health (www.camh.ca)
- Canadian Center on Substance Use and Addiction (www.ccsa.ca)
- Mood Disorder Society of Canada (<https://mdsc.ca/>)
- York Support Services (<http://www.yssn.ca/>)

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