

# Stress and Nutrition

Winning the lottery; losing a family member; the birth of a baby; getting a new job or losing one; rush hour traffic; getting married, separated, or divorced; a broken leg; noise where you work.... The list of examples of stress is virtually endless. Stress can be defined as any emotional, physical, social, economic, or other factor that requires change. The greater the change, the greater the stress experienced.

Stress can be both positive and negative. Psychological factors such as emotional tension, anxiety, or excitement can cause stress. Physical factors such as injury to the body or infection can also lead to stress.

Too much stress can be detrimental to your physical and mental well-being. Your body is physiologically prepared to deal with stressful situations using a survival mechanism known as the "fight or flight response."

The fight or flight response involves how your body reacts to stress. When you experience stress, your heart pumps faster, your blood vessels to the skin become narrow, you breathe faster, your pupils in your eyes widen, and you become more alert.

A constant fight or flight response will lead to a decrease in your productivity and poorer health. Too much stress leads to burn out.

## **Nutrition and Stress - Are They Related?**

### ***Your Diet Can Be Your Source of Stress.***

Poor eating habits such as skipping meals, consuming too much caffeine, sugar, salt, fat, or alcohol, vitamin overdoses, overeating, undereating, or dieting put the body under stress.

Poor eating habits can lead to health problems such as obesity, hypertension, high blood cholesterol levels or various nutrient deficiencies. Poor eating habits such as a high fat and low fibre diet may increase your risk for heart disease, certain cancers, obesity, hypertension, and diabetes.

### ***Your Diet Can Affect Your Body's Ability to Handle Stress.***

During stressful situations, your body requires energy to perform the fight or flight response. The foods you eat provide energy in the forms of carbohydrate, protein, and fat. Your body draws upon its stores of carbohydrate (stored as glycogen in the liver and muscles), protein (stored mainly in muscles) and fat (body fat stores) to provide energy for the stress response. Calcium is also required during stress. Your body removes calcium from the bones when it is needed.

A healthy body has tissues and stores containing optimum amounts of all essential nutrients. A healthy body is best prepared for stress. You can prepare your body for stressful situations by eating a variety of foods from Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating and enjoying regular physical activity.

### ***Stress Can Affect Your Nutrient Needs.***

If your body does not have enough vitamins and minerals stored in the body or taken in the diet daily, you may not be equipped to defend yourself in stressful situations. You may need a vitamin and mineral supplement to meet your everyday nutrient needs. Follow Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating and enjoy a variety of foods from each food group. That will ensure that you meet your vitamin and mineral requirements. Severe physical stresses have a much greater effect on your nutritional requirements. Nutrients commonly affected by extreme stresses include protein, zinc, calcium, vitamins A and C, and iron. Energy requirements also increase significantly during very stressful periods.

## How to Cope with Stress

Stress affects everyone. Stress-free living is practically impossible and probably not very exciting. We all need some level of positive stress in our lives. What is important is to learn how to deal with stress.

Good nutrition is one way to keep you functioning at your best. Enjoy a variety of foods from the food guide every day. Make your diet work for you, not against you.

Be careful with stress supplements. Excessive amounts of individual vitamins or minerals may cause an imbalance in nutrients and make it more difficult to cope with stress. Unnecessary supplements are costly, too. Spend your dollars wisely on a well-balanced diet instead. If you have questions about nutrition supplements, ask a healthcare practitioner.

Moderate your caffeine intake. Caffeine is a stimulant. It makes your heart beat faster, makes you restless, makes you need to urinate more frequently, and may upset your stomach. Too much caffeine may add to existing nervousness and irritability.

Avoid fad diets. The rapid loss of fluids and weight is hard on your body. Hunger itself can interfere with your coping skills. Try to achieve and maintain a healthy weight by healthy eating and regular physical activity, not by starving yourself.

Eat if you can. Stress often suppresses your appetite. Eat smaller, more frequent meals and drink plenty of fluids. Your body retains sodium during stress; therefore, extra water will help keep a better fluid balance in the body.

Don't eat too much! Some people eat more and too much during stressful times. Instead of reaching for food, enjoy physical activity to relieve anxiety. When you do reach for food, have plenty of low fat snacks easily accessible. Go easy on the salt and sugar, too.

Listen to your body. Are you really hungry? If not, do something else - take the dog for a walk, get some fresh air, call a friend.

Learn to balance work with play, relax, get enough sleep and rest, work off tension, talk about your problems, accept what you cannot change, and get away from your stress once in a while.

*Source: Middlesex London Health Unit*