

Stress is an unavoidable part of life, and at certain levels, is actually essential for you to perform. But when you're constantly stressed, this can impact your food choices and your health. Who reaches for a carrot when they're feeling completely overwhelmed? Not us!

Emerging research suggests that eating a diverse, nutrient-rich diet can be protective for your brain health and mood, and in turn, help you to better deal with stress.



Is stress eating a thing?

Yes, but it tends to be more common with periods of prolonged (chronic) stress rather than short-term (acute) stress, where you may find your appetite is actually reduced.

Chronic stress has been shown to alter our appetite and food preferences. Research shows that during times of chronic stress, we look for energy-dense foods and particularly those which are high in sugar and fat. That's why doughnuts and chocolates suddenly become so appealing. In addition to this, we tend to have a lower desire to eat ordinary (healthy) meals, which is a double whammy for our health.

What about stress and body weight?

When we're stressed, our body releases a hormone called cortisol. Cortisol helps to control our blood sugar levels and regulate our metabolism. However, at consistently high levels, as is the case during periods of extreme stress, cortisol can be associated with weight gain, particularly around the midsection. It's also thought that this surge in cortisol may increase our levels of leptin - the hunger hormone. Making us less sensitive to our innate hunger and fullness cues, and more susceptible to cravings.

Can we eat to beat stress?

Most of the research has examined the relationship between the effects of stress and our dietary preferences, rather than how our stress levels may be impacted by what we eat. However, we do know that eating a well-balanced diet is associated with a better mood and may help us to respond to stressors.

Mood-boosting foods

What: good quality carbohydrate foods such as whole grains

Why: whole grains are important sources of B vitamins and provide long-lasting energy, which is important for a stable mood

What: oily fish such as salmon, sardines and tuna

Why: the omega-3 fats are used for brain cell communication which assists in mood regulation

What: colourful fruit and vegetables

Why: fruit and vegies contain vitamins and minerals which are essential for the production of brain chemicals and antioxidants which help neutralise damage to brain cells



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