

Stress and Weight Gain

Do you react to pressure by reaching for chips or cookies? If so, you're not alone! While experts don't know if stress simply reduces your willpower to make good food choices or if it actually increases your appetite, reducing stress can help you prevent weight gain. Carol Simontacchi, MS, a certified clinical nutritionist and creator of WINGS: Holistic Weight and Health Management (www.flywithwings.com), explains the interaction between stress and eating and offers techniques for reducing stress.

1 Understand the Stress Response. When faced with a stressful situation, your brain signals the adrenal glands to release a hormone called **cortisol**. Cortisol, in turn, releases glucose and fatty acids into the bloodstream to provide energy to the muscles. High cortisol levels result in increased appetite and fat deposits, typically in the cervical area, trunk and abdomen.

2 Learn How Stress Impacts Eating. Stress can increase your appetite and make you crave foods that contain high calories and few nutrients. Unfortunately, researchers have not yet determined why stress-eaters make bad food choices or why they tend to gravitate toward certain types of foods.

3 Don't Worry, Be Happy. So what can you do to lessen stress? Instead of seeking comfort in food, engage in a pleasurable activity that doesn't involve calories! You might get a massage, visit a friend, read a book, watch an old movie or play games with your child.

4 Take Charge. When faced with a stressful event, ask yourself what you can change to minimize the pressure. Elect to take charge of the situation instead of being victimized by it. In the process, your body will reduce the amount of cortisol it produces, which can minimize the harmful effects of prolonged hormonal release.

5 Eat a Variety of Foods. Because stress affects blood sugar, it is important to eat healthy meals throughout the day to maintain blood sugar levels. Stress-eaters tend to reach for sugary carbohydrates, so be sure also to include the recommended amounts of protein and fat in each meal.

6 Eat Breakfast. A well-balanced breakfast that provides protein, carbohydrate and fat helps keep blood sugar levels steady throughout the day, reducing the tendency to reach for a candy bar or soft drink.

7 Replenish Vitamin and Mineral Stores. Stress causes the body to "burn" more vitamins and minerals, specifically vitamin B complex, magnesium and zinc; these nutrients are needed for blood sugar balance. When their levels drop, stress levels increase. Also, the adrenal glands require more vitamin C and pantothenic acid (part of the vitamin B complex) during stressful times. To offset these needs, eat fresh vegetables and fruits daily.

8 Get Physical. Moderate exercise can help reduce the body's production of cortisol during stressful times. Numerous studies have shown that moderate physical activity helps modulate mood, reduce stress, improve

self-esteem, and program the brain for optimism instead of pessimism. Do aerobic and anaerobic training on a regular basis, but don't overdo it. Taking your frustrations out during a vigorous workout will further increase cortisol production.

9 Avoid Dieting. Don't deprive yourself of any food group, especially during stressful periods. High-protein diets that restrict carbohydrates do not provide sufficient energy to increase low energy levels. High-carbohydrate diets that restrict fat and protein cannot fuel the energy demands of the heart or maintain lean muscle mass in the face of increased muscle breakdown. Instead, choose a well-balanced, natural-foods diet, which will provide the structural components for protein synthesis and supply adequate energy.

10 Get Plenty of Rest. Sleep deprivation affects blood sugar levels, increases cortisol and reduces the production of leptin (a hormone that signals that you are full). Go to bed a little earlier each night during trying times and aim for eight hours of sleep.



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