

Managing Stress by Eating Right

You can't just zone out or go meditate every time work makes you want to pull your hair out. But what if you could combat the stress just by eating a healthy lunch?

It's a fact – certain foods decrease stress.

Ever reach for a candy bar after a rough day and immediately feel better? Well, there's a reason for that. High-sugar, high-carbohydrate comfort foods temporarily reduce stress by triggering chemical reactions that improve your mood, but it comes at a price – a resulting spike in blood sugar followed by an inevitable crash that leaves you exhausted and cranky. And then there are the extra calories, of course.

Unless you're looking for a new set of larger, roomier clothes, it's best not to reach for comfort food whenever your nerves get frayed, especially when there are healthier choices that will get the job done better.

Natural Stress Reduction

For a food to be effective at reducing stress, it must contain the right kinds of vitamins and minerals. Here are the nutrients that are most effective at fighting stress and the supercharged foods that contain them:

- ❖ **Folic acid:** Folic acid is a B-complex vitamin that elevates mood, reduces stress, and improves mental sharpness. Spinach, collard greens, lentils, kidney beans, romaine lettuce, and asparagus are all excellent sources of folic acid.
- ❖ **Vitamin B6:** Vitamin B6 is necessary in the production of serotonin, a neurotransmitter that regulates mood, and GABA, a neurotransmitter that acts as a calming agent. Foods high in B6 include tuna, salmon, chicken breast, turkey breast, lean beef, and bananas.
- ❖ **Vitamin B12:** Vitamin B12 helps to produce both GABA and norepinephrine, a neurotransmitter that helps in maintaining a positive mood. Some great sources of B12 are snapper, halibut, scallops, shrimp, venison, and yogurt.
- ❖ **Vitamin C:** Exposure to stress releases cell-damaging free radicals that are thought to play a role in cardiovascular disease, autoimmune disease, cancer, and diabetes. Vitamin C is an antioxidant that neutralizes these free radicals and protects the body against cell damage. You can increase your intake of vitamin C by eating bell peppers, broccoli, cauliflower, oranges, cantaloupe, and strawberries.
- ❖ **Magnesium:** Magnesium aides in the production of GABA and dopamine, a neurotransmitter than stimulates pleasure centers in the brain. Foods rich in magnesium include salmon, halibut, black beans, navy beans, pumpkin seeds, and sesame seeds.
- ❖ **Whole grains:** Complex carbohydrates are great for boosting serotonin levels. Whole grain pasta, bread, and brown rice are good ways to fill up and reduce stress at the same time.



Food to Avoid

Knowing what not to eat can also help you to manage stress. Try to limit these foods:

- ❖ **Caffeine:** Caffeine contributes to stress by boosting adrenaline. Too much of it also robs your body of stress-busting B vitamins.
- ❖ **Alcohol:** Alcohol interrupts your sleep cycle, contributing to depression and fatigue. Excessive consumption can increase anxiety by preventing your body from detoxifying harmful chemicals and bringing hormonal levels into balance.
- ❖ **Saturated fats:** Foods high in saturated fats are difficult to digest and will make you feel sluggish. Limit foods like cheeseburgers, hot dogs, pizza, and doughnuts.
- ❖ **Simple carbohydrates:** Processed foods like candy, soda, french fries, and potato chips cause blood sugar crashes.

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Continuous exposure to high levels of stress creates a multitude of health problems. Start your fight against stress today – one bite at a time.

How can we help you? Call us for a confidential appointment with one of our Counselors.
Employee Advisory Service 1-866-327-9133 or EAS_Help@csc.nj.gov