



Behavioral Health Nutrition

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BHN Fact Sheet: Stress Management

Stress is a state of mental or emotional strain that has come from a difficult or demanding situation. We all experience stress on a daily basis, but sometimes the stress is too much and has a negative impact on our physical and emotional health. Too much stress can result in headaches, changes in sleep patterns, fatigue or tiredness, decreased appetite as well as changes in hormone levels that may cause unwanted weight gain. This Fact Sheet will discuss the impact of stress on physical health as well as how to improve eating habits while under stress.

General Information

Being able to manage stress is important in maintaining both physical and mental health. Stress impacts everyone differently. However, stressful events whether major or minor trigger a physical response in our bodies referred to as a “fight or flight” response. This physical

response causes our bodies to get ready to stay (“fight”) or leave the situation quickly (“flight”). The body does this by dumping hormones or chemical messengers such as adrenaline and extra glucose or fuel into our system. Short term stress can have a positive impact on us by helping us have more energy and focus to face difficult situations or challenges. However, chronic stress or being constantly in “fight or flight” mode results in higher levels of hormones such as cortisol that lead to unwanted weight gain as well as other negative side effects such as difficulty fighting off colds or infections, high blood pressure, heart disease, cancer, digestive problems, and depression.

Nutrition Concerns/Implications

Chronic stress can impact a person’s eating habits. Below are listed some of the possible side effects of chronic stress, reasons for the problem and nutrition tips.

Potential Side Effect of Chronic Stress	Potential Impact on Nutrition	Nutrition Tips
<p>Changes in gut function: Negative impact on levels of helpful bacteria in the gut (flora)</p> <p>Changes in digestion and absorption including slowed stomach emptying, diarrhea and/ or constipation</p> <p>New or worsening heartburn, acid reflux, stomach ulcers, irritable bowel disease, altered bowel habits and chronic inflammation</p>	<p>May have negative impact on body’s ability to break down and use nutrients</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve gut health by eating foods that help promote and maintain gut function including: non digestible fiber from fruits, vegetables, whole grains, as well as foods that contain live cultures or are fermented, such as yogurt, buttermilk, kefir and sauerkraut • Speak with your physician/ healthcare provider or registered dietitian nutritionist regarding worsening/ appearing symptoms

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Potential Side Effect of Chronic Stress	Potential Impact on Nutrition	Nutrition Tips
<p>Headaches, sleeplessness, fatigue, nausea, muscle and joint aches, tension and changes in appetite</p> <p>Decrease in antioxidants which help reduce harmful chemical reactions that take place in the body.</p> <p>Eating a diet high in simple sugars such as sweets and sugared beverages which lead to loss of minerals such as chromium and magnesium which help with relaxation</p> <p>Increase in intake of caffeine or alcohol— to help alleviate mood changes due to anxiety or other side effects</p> <p>Changes in mood that may impact eating habits</p>	<p>Changes in intake including excessive or inadequate intake of protein, carbohydrate, fat, vitamins, and minerals</p> <p>Choosing more non-nutrient dense foods— decreases intake of vitamins and minerals</p> <p>Use of caffeine and alcohol may impact quality of intake and hunger/ fullness signals</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Choose nutrient dense foods including lean meats/ meat alternatives, whole grains, fruits, vegetables, and healthy fats• Eat regular meals and snacks to ensure adequate intake and promote stable blood sugar levels• Include foods high in antioxidants including fruits and vegetables• Avoid “empty calorie” foods that are high in sugar content and low in nutrients• Keep healthy options readily available and in plain view during times of stress• Limit caffeine intake to less than 400mg per day• Limit alcohol intake to less than 2 oz for men and 1 oz for women daily• Speak with your physician or registered dietitian about taking a multivitamin• Drink enough fluids with a focus on water

Additional Tools and Resources:

Mayo Clinic: <http://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/basics/stress-basics/hlv-20049495>

National Institute of Health: <https://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/stress.html>

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This fact sheet does not take the place of medical advice. Please see a medical doctor or registered dietitian for recommendations

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