Can Food and Supplements Help You De-Stress?

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the B vitamins.

The end result of all these chemical ups and downs? Eating a meal or snack rich in carbs—especially with little protein—like jelly beans, popcorn or pretzels boosts levels of soothing serotonin in the brain, bringing a sense of calm and in some cases, sleepiness.

Stress Can Make You Fat and Sick.
Not surprisingly, if in seeking relief from stress you end up overeating, that can lead to weight gain. And this added weight can pack a double health whammy.

Stress, all by itself, can cause or exacerbate conditions such as high blood pressure, irregular heartbeat, insomnia, chronic pain and gastrointestinal diseases, including irritable bowel syndrome, among others. But being overweight is also a risk factor for many of these same diseases and conditions. Put the two together and the negative impact on your health is even greater.

Can Foods, Nutrients Ease Stress?
Sadly, a healthful diet is not the cure for stress and anxiety. Managing stress by avoiding, adapting or adjusting to the cause of the stress is far more effective than focusing on any particular food or nutrient in your diet. But eating right is still important, because not eating well can add to your body’s stresses.

To combat stress, concentrate on overall lifestyle changes you can make in addition to eating a healthful diet, such as getting regular exercise, catching plenty of zzz’s and finding outlets to reduce anxiety, such as meditation or yoga.

Most scientists believe that if good nutrition does help ease chronic stress, the effect is probably subtle. It is generally accepted, however, that if your diet is lacking essential nutrients, you may be more vulnerable to the physical effects of stress. For example, if stress is weakening your immune system, then eating a balanced diet can minimize the impact.

In her book The Food and Mood Cookbook: Recipes for Eating Well and Feeling Your Best (Henry Holt & Company, 2004), dietitian Elizabeth Somer suggests ways to lessen the sting of stress. Here are a few of her tips plus EN’s:

8 Essentials for Easing Stress

1. Curb coffee. If you’re sleep deprived, try eliminating caffeine; it only serves to interfere with a good night’s sleep.

2. Limit alcohol. An occasional drink is relaxing, but too much alcohol suppresses the REM phase of sleep, resulting in restless nights and stressed-out days.

3. Boost H2O. Aim for eight glasses of water a day. When tension rises, many people experience heart palpitations, sweating and dry mouth, which are aggravated by dehydration.

4. Snack on the Right Carbs. Choose whole-grain crackers, cereals or snack bars for the calming effect you crave without the negative effects of too much sugar.

5. Focus on Fiber. Fruits, vegetables, whole grains and beans will help keep you regular at a time when stress can affect gastrointestinal function.

6. Eat Regularly. When you skip meals, it accentuates the anxiety and fatigue you’re already feeling. Eating small, frequent meals provides regular fuel for the body that can help you stay focused and calm.

7. Veg Out. Fruits and vegetables are chock-full of nutrients, including the antioxidants your body needs to fight the harmful effects of free radicals and possibly combat cortisol’s negative effects.

8. Take a Multi. Stressed people tend to have poor diets, so taking a multivitamin and mineral supplement as an insurance policy makes sense.

—Kerry Neville, M.S., R.D.

Nutritional Boost for Medical Stress

While there is little scientific evidence that the mental strain that comes from a never-ending to-do list has any effect on nutrient needs, it’s a well-accepted fact that physical stress—such as a broken bone or recent surgery—can increase your body’s requirements for certain nutrients (vitamin C, zinc, magnesium and B vitamins, in particular).

Eat to Heal. Eating a well-balanced diet can help speed your physical recovery and cut short the psychological stress that accompanies any illness or surgery.

Before and after surgery and following any physical injury, be sure to include plenty of citrus fruits for vitamin C, lean meats for zinc, nuts and seeds for magnesium, and whole grains, beans, lentils, dark leafy greens and low-fat milk for B vitamins. During this time, it may be wise to take extra vitamin C, zinc and B vitamins in supplement form, in addition to your daily multi. Check with your doctor.

Supplements That May Short-Circuit Stress

Lots of supplements claim to combat stress. But do they? The research on some popular supplements suggests they may help alleviate anxiety and other symptoms of stress to some degree, without resorting to prescription anti-anxiety medications.

These supplements are classified as either "adaptogens," which help the body defend against the damaging effects of physical stress, or "anxiolytics," which help relieve anxiety. They are available at pharmacies and health food stores. Here’s a look at how well they work:

3 Over-the-Counter Adaptogens

Ginseng is often promoted for stress relief, but research results are mixed. Animal studies—most poorly designed—show some promise, but human trials are few and those that are available are mixed on ginseng’s effectiveness against physical stress.

Plant sterols, found in soy and a variety of nuts, seeds and vegetables, are more familiar as cholesterol-busters, but recent research suggests they may help boost the immune system following a stressful event.

Vitamin C has been shown to reduce levels of cortisol following a stressful event. Animal studies show it can help shore up an immune system brought down by stress. Citrus fruits like oranges and grapefruit, and vegetables like broccoli and cabbage are good sources of C, but you likely need a supplement (500 milligrams twice a day) temporarily to make a difference following physical stress.

3 Herbal Anxiolytics

Lemon Balm contains terpenes, which may play a role in the herb’s anti-anxiety properties. Human studies suggest it can induce a feeling of calmness during times of psychological stress.

Passionflower is a traditional remedy for anxiety. Though there’s little clinical evidence that it is effective (it was banned as an over-the-counter sedative in 1978, because of a lack of proof that it worked), it is commonly used in Germany as a relaxing herb. One small clinical study found it as effective as a prescription anti-anxiety medication.

Kava kava is said to improve mood and promote relaxation, but research results are inconsistent. In rare cases, kava has reportedly caused liver damage; it can also interact with some prescription drugs.