

Stress and Overeating:

Does stress make you gain weight?

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Does stress make you gain weight? For some of us it may. When we are under stressful situations, we tend to grab the worst foods possible, and lots of it. Typical foods we indulge in include those high in simple sugars such as sodas, candy, cakes; and easy, high fat foods such as fast food and highly processed quick foods. What makes us crave these foods? The culprit may be something our bodies make naturally. Cortisol is the hormone released when under stress. This hormone causes the body to use carbohydrate and fat for quick energy. This response is sometimes called the “fight or flight” response. Once the immediate stress has passed, appetite increases to make up for the energy used. The problem is we tend to overeat and the calories taken in are not burned off. The theory is that glucose not used is converted to fat and is stored mainly in the abdominal region. Some studies suggest that an increase in cortisol secretion lowers immunity and may also lead to sugary and fat cravings. This hormone that is released can also lower serotonin levels, the calming hormone. This can cause you to crave carbohydrates, which may help balance serotonin levels.

You need carbohydrates for immediate energy and focus but try to eat the right kind of carbs. Complex carbohydrates such as whole grain breads and pastas, brown rice, fruit, milk and yogurt will keep you satisfied for a longer period of time.

Omega-3’s can help regulate cortisol levels as well. Fatty fish is the best source: salmon, tuna, mackerel, herring, lake trout, and sardines. Other foods that can be converted to the appropriate omega-3’s in the body include walnuts, tofu, flaxseed, soybean and canola oil.

Some other nutrients that may help prevent cravings include magnesium, which is thought to help regulate cortisol levels along with promoting normal blood pressure levels. A lack of magnesium can cause fatigue and weakness. You can find magnesium in highest amounts in almonds, cashews, pumpkin seeds, hazelnuts, spinach, halibut, black, white and navy beans. When we are anxious, B vitamins are in need. B vitamins help maintain our nervous system and brain function. B vitamins are found in lean meats, fruits and veggies such as avocados, bananas, mangos, broccoli and potatoes, most nuts and whole grains such as wheat, barley, brown rice and oats.

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Some tips to avoiding weight gain while under stress:

- Eat small meals throughout the day and include a bedtime snack of complex carbohydrates
- Limit simple sugars and caffeine- Have only 1-2 caffeinated beverages per day and consume 1 8oz water after having caffeine.
- Need something sweet? Try dark chocolate that is full of antioxidants and may improve energy levels and mood.
- Eat high protein foods with meals and snacks- protein will help to promote satiety; Tyrosine, an amino acid found in high protein foods, boosts levels of dopamine and norepinephrine under stressful conditions that can help you feel alert and focused. Examples of high protein foods include lean meats and fish, low fat dairy products, nuts and seeds, and soy products.

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- <http://www.healthplusfitness.com/services/nutrition/index.asp>
- Nutritional Counseling \$75 for members and \$99 for nonmembers
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