

FOOD ON THE MOVE

SNACKING WHEN STRESSED

Stressful times

It's been a long day, deadlines are looming, assignments are due, the pile of work in front of you doesn't seem to be getting any smaller and it's only 3pm. There's a box of doughnuts in the kitchen – or at least there was, before you polished off the last 2 in a blurry haze of stress without even realising! Sound familiar?

Stress eating is a common way of dealing with the pressures of an increased workload or hectic period, when your mind is focussed elsewhere and your eating habits become rather more mindless.

Effects of stress on appetite

At least temporarily, the doughnut – or two! – may make you feel better, providing comfort and satisfaction. One treat to help power you through a busy time is not something to be worried about. However, in periods of prolonged stress, such as in the lead up to exams, or with a looming presentation to prepare for, giving into stress-induced food cravings and mindless, rushed snacking can actually contribute to heightened stress levels and overeating, potentially leading to weight gain.

In the short-term, stress can actually diminish your appetite – your body is put into a fight-or-flight response, and in this revved-up state can temporarily put eating on hold.

However as stress levels persist, the adrenal glands release a hormone called Cortisol, which increases appetite and increases motivation – including the motivation to eat!

High cortisol levels may also affect food preferences – forget stress-eating your way through a bag of carrots and a whole punnet of blueberries – studies suggest that in a state of stress, our intake of high-fat and high-sugar foods are significantly increased. These highly palatable and calorie-dense foods appear to “quieten” down the part of the brain that processes and produces stress and its related emotions. In other words, it could be that we crave these foods as a subconscious way of counteracting stress, which would explain why they temporarily make you feel better.

Often stress-eating is done without consideration and scoffed down quickly – this mad panic sensation and feeling of desperation is not only used to mask the underlying cause of stress, but can also worsen the stress when combined with the potential guilt and regret of overeating!

Smart snacks for stress eaters

If you find you have one hand busy writing notes, with the other hand reaching deep into the biscuit tin, try some of these snack ideas in times of stress to reduce overeating and making poor choices.

- **Tea** – tea can be helpful for combatting cravings, as well as helping you stay hydrated – something that is quickly “forgotten” in times of stress! Drinking tea can lower cortisol levels. But be mindful of caffeine consumption, which can rev up your stress response – limit to 3-4 cups a day maximum. Green tea can give you a gentle energy boost without the crash, while chamomile tea is known for its’ soothing and relaxing properties, aiding a restful sleep and calming nerves.
- **Bananas** – the perfect choice when you’re feeling stressed, bananas contain potassium and vitamin B6, both good stress-fighting substances. They also satisfy the sweet craving, while providing slow release energy, great to help fight off unwanted cravings and impulse snacking.
- **Nuts** – Nuts are good sources of B vitamins, which can help to relieve stress and reduce the harmful effects. Nuts also contain high levels of heart-healthy monounsaturated fats and fat soluble vitamins – include a variety of different nuts in a handful as a healthy snack to help fight cravings – include a few squares of dark chocolate (70% cocoa solids minimum) to up the indulgence, boost the mood and lower cortisol levels!
- **Red peppers with houmous or avocado dip** – oranges get all the vitamin C hype, and while they are delicious AND nutritious, red peppers have twice as much vitamin C, which can lower blood pressure and help you recover faster from cortisol surges in stressful situations!
- **Spinach** – while not necessarily the best snack in its’ own right, including spinach in snacks and meals can increase your magnesium intake, known to help regulate cortisol and blood pressure. Magnesium levels deplete in times of stress, so keep intake high with other magnesium-rich foods such as beans, brown rice, tuna and yoghurt.

Other things you can do

Meditation – Meditation may not only help you reduce the underlying causes of stress and improve the way that you process and deal with it, but it can also help to make you mindful of food choices, pay better attention to the impulse to grab fatty and sugary comfort foods and to inhibit those impulses.

Exercise – Physical activity and moving your body is proven to be the best way to deal with stress for both mind and body, not least because of all the other wonderful health benefits it brings with it. Try getting out for a 5 minute walk when you feel the urge to make a bee-line towards the family-sized Toblerone. It will not only help to get the blood flowing and clear your head, but will also reduce the risk of overeating.

Mindful eating – Consciously allow yourself to snack and satisfy your craving. Instead of frantically stuffing your face with inevitable guilt afterwards, allow yourself to find enjoyment in it - sit down away from your desk and eat it without distraction, calmly and mindfully. This may reduce the quantity you eat, as well as reducing feelings of deprivation and consequent stress.

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