

Nutrition and Fitness: Your Keys to Coping with Stress

When you're under stress, one of your best defenses is good health. To keep your body healthy, a well-balanced diet and a regular program of exercise are essential.

Eat Right to Cope with Stress

Eating nutritious foods helps your body respond to stressful situations. Eating a variety of foods usually provides the nutrients needed for good health for most people. Choose foods from MyPyramid to get the nutrients your body needs:

- Fruits – fresh, frozen, canned and dried fruits and fruit juices
- Vegetables – fresh, frozen, canned, and dried vegetables and vegetable juices
- Grains – bread, pasta, oatmeal, breakfast cereals, tortillas, and grits. At least half of the grain foods should be whole grains.
- Meat and Beans – lean meat, poultry, fish, eggs, peanut butter, dry beans, nuts and seeds
- Milk – fluid milk and milk products, such as yogurt and cheese. Choose fat-free or low-fat milk.

Emotional stress and psychological stress usually don't increase your body's nutrient needs above the recommended amounts so you probably won't need any special diet preparations or supplements. If you take a vitamin supplement, be sure to choose one that provides no more than 100% of the recognized nutrients. Remember that very large doses of some vitamins and minerals can be harmful.

- Maintain a regular eating schedule. Irregular eating patterns interfere with the body's ability to cope.
- Avoid meal skipping or skimping. Hungry people lose their ability to concentrate and often respond poorly to stressful situations.
- Try to make mealtimes relaxed and enjoyable. Eat with those you enjoy being with, talk about pleasant topics and plan enough time to eat slowly.

- Satisfy your body's defenses by eating nutritious snacks such as fruit, juice, raw vegetables and milk.
- Avoid high fat and fried foods that may be difficult to digest.
- Drink plenty of water. A good fluid intake helps your body resist the effects of strain.

If stress leads you to "binges," try these . . .

- Take a walk or visit a friend instead of eating.
- Keep nutritious, low fat snacks on hand instead of those high in calories or fat.
- Learn to recognize when you're really hungry, not just needing the security that food often offers.

If stress makes you lose your appetite, try these . . .

- Eat several small meals throughout the day.
- Plan a quiet time before meals to relax and unwind.
- Keep nutritious, easy to eat snacks on hand.



Exercise Regularly to Cope with Stress

Regular exercise makes you a healthier person with more energy by offering these benefits:

- Improves the heart's efficiency.
- Increases strength and capacity of the lungs.
- Decreases body fat and increases muscle mass.
- Helps control weight.
- Lowers blood pressure.
- Decreases anxiety, tension and depression through production of the body's natural tranquilizers.
- Helps you sleep better.
- Helps prevent constipation.
- Helps combat muscle and joint stiffness.
- Makes your bones stronger.

What's the best exercise?

For health and longevity, experts recommend at least 30 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise most days of the week. Example: walking two miles at a 15-minute-per-mile pace, mowing the lawn with a power mower or playing golf (if carrying clubs).

For aerobic fitness to improve heart and lungs, exercise up to 45 minutes three to five times a week. Examples include brisk walking outside or on a treadmill, bicycling, swimming or running.

You don't need to do all your exercise at one time to get many health benefits. To lower heart rate, blood pressure and blood cholesterol levels, divide your 30 minutes of exercise into three 10-minute sessions a day if this suits your schedule better.

Keep these points in mind when exercising:

- If you're a man over 40 or a woman over 50, consult your doctor before starting an exercise program.
- Exercise moderately and routinely.
- Increase exercise gradually.
- Warm up before and cool down after exercise.
- Drink plenty of water before, during and after your workout.
- If you stop exercising because of illness, start back slowly.
- Choose an exercise you enjoy and get started.

Reference

USDA MyPyramid website: www.mypyramid.gov

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