

### BEATING STRESS THROUGH BETTER NUTRITION

Stress is a natural part of life but excessive stress can increase the risk of high blood pressure, heart disease and obesity over time. Did you know that stress-related diseases also affect the gastrointestinal (GI) tract – more so than any other physiological system in the body? Have you ever felt so stressed out that you were literally sick to your stomach? Stress can bring about illnesses and conditions such as ulcers, acid reflex, colitis, irritable bowel syndrome and Crohn's disease. This month's WellPATH Spotlight focuses on the important link between stress and nutrition.

#### STRESS, DIET & THE IMMUNE SYSTEM: THE DOMINO EFFECT

When you are stressed, your immune system suffers. And once a single aspect of the immune system is affected, it's not long before a whole chain reaction of negative responses can occur. In other words, it's a domino effect. The next section takes a look at how and why these "dominos" fall, and tips you can use to manage your stress triggers.

#### The Body's Nutrients Are Depleted

When you're stressed, important nutrients will be used up much faster as the body kicks into its "fight or flight" response. In the stress-response process, the body utilizes more nutrients than it might normally use during a resting state, including vital minerals like magnesium, calcium, potassium, zinc and copper. These minerals are utilized by the body in about 15 different metabolic processes. If these critical nutrients are depleted, your metabolism suffers because it does not have the "fuel" it needs to function properly.

#### Unhealthy "Quick Fixes"

When people are stressed, good eating habits tend to go out the window. Stressed individuals will gravitate toward comfort foods, junk foods and highly processed foods. Also, when people are stressed, it's hard to find time to prepare foods or cook, so it's easy to turn to frozen dinners, fast food or take out. What's important to keep in mind is that most prepackaged and fast foods are prepared at the lowest cost possible, and with little to no regard for health and nutrition quality. These foods are usually stacked with processed sugar, salt, fats and various other substances that tend to please your taste buds, but wreak havoc on the rest of your body.

#### Poor Food Choices Trigger the Stress Response

Much like putting gasoline on a fire when you're trying to put the fire out, many foods that people will turn to when stressed tend to promote the stress response even further. Foods that induce the body's stress response include anything with refined sugar, processed flour or white flour, salt and caffeine. Foods containing these substances trigger the release of epinephrine and norepinephrine into the bloodstream, which increase heart rate, blood pressure and metabolic activity. When you are already feeling stressed, this food-induced trigger only adds to the problem.

By choosing certain foods, changing your eating habits and making more mindful nutritional decisions, you can reduce your stress and even reverse the harmful effects it has on the body.

## TIPS FOR BETTER STRESS MANAGEMENT THROUGH NUTRITION

### Eat a Variety of Food Colors

Within the past 10 years, researchers discovered compounds called bioflavonoids, which are plant substances that give fruits and vegetables their color and contain antioxidant properties. More recently researchers discovered that bioflavonoids can help fight cancer or the growth of cancer cells.

It's important to note that you can only benefit from these properties when you eat fresh fruits and vegetables with naturally occurring bioflavonoids; processed potato chips do not contain the same, nutritionally beneficial compounds. Maximize the bioflavonoids you are taking in by eating a variety of vibrant colors such as:

- Red peppers
- Green apples
- Blueberries
- Green, leafy vegetables



### Choose Foods That are High in Antioxidants

Free radicals are oxygen molecules, and when they enter the body, they work hard to destroy healthy cells, cell membranes, mitochondria, and RNA and DNA. This is clearly a bad thing, but the good news is that the dangerous effects of free radicals can be counteracted by consuming foods rich in antioxidants. Antioxidants can essentially destroy free radicals and can be found in a variety of fruits and vegetables.

### Eat More Fiber

Dietary fiber found mainly in fruits, vegetables, and whole grains is probably best known for its ability to prevent or relieve constipation. But foods containing fiber can provide other health benefits as well including: helps control blood sugar level and lowers your risk of diabetes and heart disease. Why is fiber so important? It actually passes quickly through your GI tract, mostly intact, and it is not broken down like other foods. The fact that fiber is mostly left intact is a good thing as it creates bulk which aids in moving stool through the GI tract. The best sources of fiber include fruits and vegetables.

### Coping With Stress One Bite at a Time

Eat at least one meal a day that is nutritionally designed for your immune system. Just one meal! If you can incorporate any of the tips above into that one meal, you will be doing pretty well, because by and large, most people today are not eating any meals for their immune system.

## HELPFUL RESOURCES & WEBSITES

For more resources to help you beat stress through better nutrition, check out the resources listed below:

- <http://www.eatright.org/>
- [www.choosemyplate.gov](http://www.choosemyplate.gov)
- [Local Farmers Markets](#)



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