

- Health

## What to eat to beat stress

REMOVE TEMPTATION, ALTER THOSE HABITS AND YOUR BODY WILL WELCOME A HEALTHIER YOU WITH OPEN ARMS

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A little stress is not a bad thing, with moderate exposure proven to boost attention and aid performance. But the downside of this is that chronically high levels of stress can impair immune function, mood and play havoc with the hormones that control our weight. That's why eating the right food and eating the right way is critical in this pandemic era.



When we are stressed, two groups of hormones; the glucocorticoids which include cortisol and the catecholamines, put significant pressure on the body's immune system as well as the metabolism when elevated.

Cortisol in particular is associated with weight gain as high cortisol triggers fat storage in the body in preparation for a perceived threat. This means stress may not only drive the desire to eat, and make us eat more sugary, high-calorie foods but excessive calories in these foods are more likely to be stored, and weight loss will become increasingly difficult.

So what are the key triggers to look out for?

WHAT IS STRESS EATING?

From a behavioural perspective, while some people stop eating completely when stressed, with anxiety directly affecting appetite and interest in food, there are also plenty of people who reach for food to help self-soothe when they are feeling stressed and anxious. This response to stress may have been programmed in life early, when you consider that crying babies and small children are often placated with sweet, treat type foods. Or grabbing some chocolate or ice-cream provides distraction and temporary relief from the feelings and emo-

tions you are dealing with. The greater the volume of sweet processed food we eat, the more we want, and the more we need to get the same 'hit'. It quickly becomes stress binge eating, with weight gain over time an unwanted side effect therefore more stress.

#### HOW TO FIX IT

So if a stressful day usually has you reaching for the ice-cream or biscuits, here are some easy ways to eat to help beat it:

##### 1. Work out when stress eating is most likely to happen

Human beings eat in ways that are familiar to them — that may translate into snacking on sweet food after dinner each night, regularly grabbing a processed snack mid-afternoon at work, or indulging on a Friday or Saturday night. If stress overeating is an ongoing issue, the first step in taking control is to work out the times it happens most. Is it at home, or at work? Is it when you are by yourself, or with others? Once you are more aware of the times stress eating creeps into your routine, it will be easier to make a plan to adjust the environment so that it is not so easy to indulge.

##### 2. Get rid of the trigger foods

If tempting foods are within easy reach, at work or at home, you will eat them, especially if you have routinely selfsoothed with these foods in the past. This means if you are serious about taking control of stress eating you need to keep any tempting treats and sweet food out of the house.

##### 3. Change the routine or environment

Habitual food behaviour, such as eating chocolate when you watch TV is closely linked to the environment in which you do it. You signal to your brain it is time for sweet food. As such, changing routines and environments so you are not triggered to stress eat is crucial. Get out of the house when you know you are likely to stress eat.

##### 4. Find healthier alternatives

We generally opt for cakes, biscuits, ice-cream and desserts. If you must eat when you are stressed, shifting to lighter, low calorie and nutrient rich options in portion controlled serves such as individual packets of popcorn, frozen yoghurt teamed with berries, individual hot chocolates or cheese and cracker snacks will at least help to keep your calories more controlled.

##### 5. Get your healthy platform right

The stress response is amplified when we are tired, not eating well and not exercising regularly. This means making a concerted effort to get enough rest, exercise daily and focus on eating balanced, healthy meals 3-4 times each day. And as stress is not going anywhere, ideally we will get better at managing it, rather than simply responding to it with food, alcohol or stimulants.