

## Stress, Cortisol and Weight: Tips for Healthy Eating During Stressful Times

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Did you ever dig into a large tub of ice cream after a long, stressful day? Lo and behold, genetics could have something to do with your cravings.

In ancient times, stressful events were typically something physical and short-lived, such as running from a wild animal. Today, though, stress surrounds us all the time. Work deadlines, marriage or financial troubles and fast-paced hectic lifestyles may be the daily norm.

But our bodies deal with stress the same way they did hundreds or thousands of years ago. No matter the cause of the stress, our bodies respond like we're about to be harmed and need to fight for our lives. This is also called the "fight or flight" response. To answer this need, we may get a burst of energy from the release of several hormones, among other changes.

### The cortisol connection

One of these hormones, *cortisol*, releases stored sugar so your body has the fuel needed to react quickly. Studies have shown that stress - if chronic - may keep our cortisol level high. This makes us crave fats and carbohydrates - fuels that "feed" the stress response. So from an evolutionary standpoint, we are designed to respond to stress by eating high-energy foods. These foods may also temporarily reduce the high-stress response state, which makes us feel better.

Unfortunately, the foods we typically reach for tend to be poor in nutrition and high in calories, which causes weight gain. Worse, after a minute on your lips, these foods may go straight to our bellies, not our hips. It's this type of abdominal fat that is more likely to be linked to heart disease, diabetes and other chronic diseases.

### Eating tips for managing stress

It's hard to avoid stress, but there are better ways to manage it than bingeing on ice cream. Relaxation techniques, regular exercise and small changes in your eating habits can go a long way toward easing cravings and avoiding weight gain. Check out the following tips for some guidance:

- **Eat regular meals and snacks.** Skipping meals contributes to hunger and low blood sugar, which can worsen cravings. Try to eat within 1 hour of waking up, followed by a healthy meal or snack every 3 to 4 hours.
- **Limit refined carbs and unhealthy fats,** like cookies, cakes, doughnuts, white bread or pasta. These foods contain refined sugar and flour, and allow a great surge of energy. But the surge is generally followed by an even greater dip in energy, causing you to feel worse.
- **Limit soda and coffee.** Caffeine can pick you up in the short term. Long-term, though, it can leave you feeling more tired and more apt to turn to sugar as a pick-me-up.
- **Increase whole foods.** Eat meals and snacks that are made of fresh whole foods, preferably organic or locally grown, without colors, dyes, chemicals, preservatives or added hormones.
- **Include some protein with all your meals and snacks,** especially in the morning. This will help stabilize your blood sugar, which can help with cravings. Lean meats, chicken and fish, low-fat dairy, tofu and beans are all good choices.

We know healthy eating can help prevent some chronic diseases and keep weight gain at bay. Why not let it help you lower your stress level, too?