



# EAT TO BEAT STRESS

Simone McClenaghan discovers how what you eat can either help or harm your stress levels – and what you can do when you're feeling overwhelmed.



**A** 2011 Lifeline survey found that a massive 93 per cent of Australians feel stressed – and almost half of respondents constantly experienced high levels of stress. While stress is something you can't always avoid, science has proven that certain foods – and other factors, such as exercise – can help provide relief.

## WHAT IS STRESS AND HOW DOES IT AFFECT US?

Clinical psychologist Dr Cindy Nour specialises in stress, anxiety and health. "Stress", explains Dr Nour, "is an accumulation of things that lead to a stress reaction. It occurs when you have too many demands and not enough resources to meet them. Normal levels of stress are essential for you to perform and stay interested in life and your daily activities. However, too much stress can lead you to feel overwhelmed and [result in] a reduction in performance and activities."

### Symptoms of stress manifest in three main ways:

**PHYSICAL:** headaches and migraines; upset stomach; muscle tension; disturbed sleep; changes to appetite, and heightened blood pressure.  
**MENTAL:** poor attention, concentration and memory; and difficulty making decisions.  
**EMOTIONAL:** anxiety; low mood; irritability and nervousness.

This year's Lifeline survey of 1200 people revealed the biggest stressor for Australians is work. Finances, thinking about the future, health and relationships followed close

behind. Other common stressors include sex, family get-togethers and Christmas.

Accredited Practising Dietitian and nutritionist Alison Martin, who is doing her PhD in mental health and diet, adds that "stress can also arise as a consequence to the way you treat your body and not having what it takes to recover". A lack of exercise, sleep or fresh air; a busy lifestyle; as well as what you're putting into your body – such as an unhealthy diet, alcohol and drugs – can also result in stress. Left unchecked, stress can escalate and have more serious consequences for both your physical and mental health – so it's important to try to manage stress as soon as it begins to affect you.

### Stress and your weight

Another potential side effect of unchecked stress is weight gain. "Prolonged stress can result in cortisol (the stress hormone) increasing", says Dr Nour. Studies published in the journal *Obesity* found that increased stress, and the production of cortisol, can cause hunger and ultimately, weight gain.

The other hormone that contributes to weight gain



in stressful times is ghrelin. It's the hormone that tells us we're hungry and, according to research published in *Neuropsychopharmacology*, it also increases cortisol levels, which makes us even hungrier. This is concerning when it comes to stress, as eating is a common coping mechanism.

"People often engage in [other] unhelpful coping strategies, such as increased alcohol and drug use, rather than more helpful coping strategies which include exercising, talking to a friend, or problem-solving the issues causing stress", says Dr Nour.

If stress is affecting your eating and sleeping habits, work, study and relationships, or if you're feeling overly-anxious and worried, it's time to see your doctor and discuss the option of talking to a professional. "Stress can get in the way of good judgement and decision-making. It can help talking to someone for some perspective and strategies to assist you to better be able to cope", advises Dr Nour.

 Simone McClenaghan is a journalist specialising in health, nutrition, fitness and well-being.



## PREVENTATIVE MEASURES

If you're feeling stressed, there are some simple ways you can alleviate or even prevent stress - many of which involve diet choices and exercise.

It's important to identify the things that are causing your stress - then you can devise techniques to handle or avoid these stressors. This might involve preparing yourself for stressful situations; learning to delegate more tasks at work; or approaching a friend, colleague or family member and confiding in them that you need help.

"Exercising is also helpful as it combats cortisol", says Dr Nour. A small pilot study in *Biological Research for Nursing* found that after a 10-week exercise program, study participants had improved mood and reduced stress levels. Regular exercise is the key, as it produces a chemical response (endorphins) that triggers positive feelings. Not only does exercise help you

work out frustrations and clear your mind, it encourages the body to produce serotonin (a hormone linked to mood and stress levels) which helps you get a good night's sleep - a key component in managing stress.

APD Alison Martin says that a balanced diet also "helps our body build resilience to everyday stressors." Amanda Clark, a Gold Coast dietitian specialising in mental health, and author of *Portion Perfection*, couldn't agree more. "Our bodies react really well to routine and by consuming enough of all nutrients you're providing the baseline for an appropriate response to stress."

In addition to a balanced diet, certain nutrient-rich foods are particularly helpful when it comes to managing stress - while other foods can fuel it.

## FOODS THAT FUEL STRESS

The biggest 'stress-fuelling' foods are high-GI foods that are

### » Take a breather

**Feeling frazzled? Try taking a deep breath to help you de-stress quickly.**

**When stressed, breathing tends to be shallower and in the upper chest - which can result in hyperventilating. Abdominal breathing (using your diaphragm) soothes the nervous system and can help with anxiety, stress and panic attacks. To breathe properly, you need to be aware of your chest and stomach, and find a steady rhythm.**

**For more information on proper breathing techniques, talk to a pilates or yoga instructor or check out: [www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bharticles.nsf/pages/Breathing\\_to\\_reduce\\_stress](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bharticles.nsf/pages/Breathing_to_reduce_stress)**



loaded with sugar and white flour. High-GI foods are quickly absorbed into the body, which makes insulin levels rise. This results in a spike in serotonin and tryptophan, which is a pre-cursor to serotonin. "The problem with this is that the insulin, tryptophan and serotonin levels will drop again and this creates feelings of irritability and depression", says Amanda.

This constant see-sawing can be avoided by eating low-GI foods (like low-fat dairy, wholegrains and legumes) that release energy slowly and keep your insulin and serotonin levels stable.

The UK Food and Mood Project studied 200 people aged 26-55 and found that the common foods that increase feelings of stress are: sugar, alcohol, caffeine, chocolate, foods with additives and foods high in saturated fat.

Ironically, the foods that stoke the stressful fire are also the ones we tend to turn to when we are stressed. This is a result of two things: firstly, when stressed we feel we need an 'energy kick' and that is often found in high-kJ foods. Secondly, it seems that surviving a stressful situation creates a desire to participate in pleasurable activities, like eating high-energy food.

A study on stress and food choices at University College London found that stressed, emotional eaters gravitated towards sugary, high-fat foods and a more energy-dense meal than the test group of unstressed and non-emotional eaters.

## FOODS THAT FIGHT STRESS

These particular foods that have been shown to help either prevent or combat stress.

### THE FOODS: Red capsicum and oranges



#### HOW IT HELPS:

Raw red capsicum and oranges are packed with vitamin C. "Vitamin C helps reduce feelings of stress by reducing the levels of cortisol in the blood", says Amanda. Additionally, Alison says that vitamin C "strengthens the immune system, which can weaken due to stress." Plus, "crunching on raw veggies helps ward off a stressed, clenched jaw", explains Alison.

### THE FOOD: Blueberries



#### HOW IT HELPS:

Blueberries are bursting with antioxidants and vitamin C, making them "a potent stress-busting combination that helps lower cortisol levels and blood pressure," says Alison.

### THE FOOD: Green or black tea



#### HOW IT HELPS:

It's complicated! "Both types of tea contain a substance called L-theanine, which has been found to create a calm and alert affect", reports Amanda. Research published in the *Asia Pacific Journal of Clinical Nutrition* found that L-theanine helps you relax without becoming drowsy.

On the other hand, caffeine has been found to increase feelings of anxiety in some people, and green and black tea do contain caffeine. We recommend watching your tea and coffee intake if you are particularly sensitive to caffeine. Try caffeine-free herbal tea - chamomile is especially known for its calming properties. However, L-theanine is not found in chamomile plants.

If you aren't certain whether caffeine is fuelling your stress levels, try switching from coffee to green tea (which has much less caffeine) or herbal tea for a few days to see if you feel calmer.

## Foods that fight stress (cont'd):

### THE FOOD: Salmon



#### HOW IT HELPS:

DHA (docosahexaenoic acid) is a fatty acid in the omega-3 family, and is found in oily fish. "DHA lowers norepinephrine (a hormone that can fuel anxiety and anger) levels in both stressed and non-stressed subjects", says Amanda. Alison also advises that a higher intake of omega-3s may help protect against depression, as it helps brain cell communication, which assists in mood regulation.

### THE FOOD: Walnuts



#### HOW IT HELPS:

"Walnuts contain 2.5g of ALA (alpha linolenic acid, which is a plant form of omega-3 fatty acid per 30g serve)", says Amanda. Walnuts contain 17 times the amount of ALA in almonds and nine times the amount of ALA found in pecans.

The RDI for ALA is 1.3g per day. The body converts ALA to DHA, which - similar to oily fish - helps lowers norepinephrine levels and may result in reduced feelings of anxiousness.

### THE FOOD: Avocado



#### HOW IT HELPS:

"Avocado is full of potassium, which helps reduce blood pressure", says Alison (blood pressure rises when you are stressed). Additionally, "you often crave fatty foods when stressed and avocado contains plenty of good fats, so it's a great option to abate the craving", she says.

### THE FOOD: Pearl barley



#### HOW IT HELPS:

Pearl barley is a low-GI food and "low-GI foods may influence the level of stress or create a more stable mood for sensitive people by keeping insulin levels stable", explains Amanda. Try replacing the rice in your meal with pearl barley.

### THE FOOD: Green leafy vegetables



#### HOW IT HELPS:

Green leafy vegetables, like cabbage and silverbeet, are full of B vitamins and folate. Amanda says that these vitamins are associated with a healthy and stable mood. Research presented in the *Journal of Psychopharmacology* found that people with low levels of vitamin B and folate tend to be at a higher risk of mood disorders and depressive symptoms.

### THE FOOD: Dairy



#### HOW IT HELPS:

Dairy products are another source of folate and B vitamins. Evidence published in the *British Medical Journal* states that folic acid positively affects mood and cognitive function. The nutrients in milk - including folate, B vitamins and the amino acid tryptophan - help raise serotonin levels, therefore "milk has a positive impact on serotonin levels and helps control mood swings", says Alison.

### THE FOOD: Wholegrains



#### HOW IT HELPS:

Wholegrains are an excellent source of B vitamins. Research published in the *American Journal of Psychiatry* found that people with a vitamin B deficiency were more likely to suffer from depression. Unchecked stress levels have also been shown to be a risk factor for the development of depression.

### THE FOOD: Spinach



#### HOW IT HELPS:

"Spinach is chock-full of magnesium", says Alison. "If your magnesium levels are low, you can get headaches and feel fatigued. And when stressed, you rapidly burn through your magnesium stores." This is because you need more magnesium to keep your muscles relaxed and nervous system functioning.

## WHEN STRESS BECOMES MORE SERIOUS

Unmanaged stress can evolve into an anxiety disorder. Generalised anxiety disorder (GAD) is when you're constantly worried and have been on most days for at least six months. GAD affects around five per cent of Australians and, left untreated, may lead to depression.

Deputy CEO of Beyond Blue, Dr Nicole Highet is also a psychologist who specialises in mental health. According to Dr Highet, GAD is caused by genetics and lifestyle. Risk factors include a family history of anxiety and depression, leading a stressful life, not getting enough sleep and using drugs.

There are many treatments for GAD that go hand-in-hand with eating a healthy, balanced diet; avoiding alcohol and caffeine; and getting enough exercise. Counselling teaches you how to handle stressors and develop healthy thinking processes. Relaxation training helps you control symptoms through techniques like meditation. Medical intervention uses antidepressants to manage GAD. Generally, "for severe cases, all three treatments are used. For mild to moderate cases, counselling and relaxation training are used", says Dr Highet.

### » Have you got generalised anxiety disorder symptoms?

On most days for the last six months have you:

- Felt very worried?
- Found it hard to stop worrying?
- Found that you were anxious and this made it hard to do everyday activities such as working, studying, seeing friends and family?
- Felt restless or on edge?
- Felt easily tired?
- Had difficulty concentrating?
- Felt irritable?
- Had muscle pain?
- Had trouble sleeping?

If you answered 'yes' to most of these questions, it is important to schedule a visit with your doctor. Dr Highet recommends taking the results of this quiz to your GP who will help develop a treatment plan for you.

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