

Stress-Proof Your Diet

Overweight? Curb your urge to calorie-splurge

By Stacey Colino

Some people lose their appetites when they're **under stress**. More often than not, though, the opposite is true: Stressful situations trigger emotional eating for a lot of people, whether it's because food provides a source of comfort or because they feel extra hungry when they're under stress. So it's hardly surprising that "stress is the number-one predictor of gaining or regaining weight," says John Foreyt, Ph.D., director of behavioral medicine research at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston. "When people are under stress, to get rid of the negative feelings they tend to revert to eating high-fat or high-calorie foods they liked in childhood."

Indeed, recent research from the University of California, San Francisco suggests that we're actually biologically wired for this behavior. Scientists have found that consuming food that's laden with sugar, fat and calories appears to literally calm down the body's response to stress, causing a slowdown in the release of stress hormones. While this can be a good thing in the short-term, some experts are concerned that our increasingly stressful way of life may be contributing to the **growing obesity epidemic** by continuously triggering hormonal surges that, in turn, stimulate appetite.

But this doesn't mean you have to be at the mercy of your physiology. You can learn to handle stressful situations without overindulging. The key is to follow the right strategies for your situation.

Chronic Stress

By Stacey Colino

There are times in your life when your stress-meter registers overload but there's no immediate solution for getting rid of the source. Maybe you're miserable in your job or you have serious financial troubles. When stress is sustained, as it is in these situations, the urge to nosh can be practically irrepressible. But overindulging will probably only make you feel worse, especially if you eat lots of sweet or starchy foods, which is what women often crave when they're under stress, Dr. Foreyt says. Remind yourself that food is not the answer. What is? Practicing smart coping strategies.

Map out your meals

Before ongoing stress has the chance to wreck **your diet**, plan your meals so that you eat regularly and have some lean protein, fat and carbohydrates in every meal, advises Catherine Christie, Ph.D., R.D., an assistant professor of nutrition at the University of North Florida in Jacksonville and coauthor of *I'd Kill for a Cookie*. "The carbohydrates will calm you and the protein will give you sustained energy." Ideally, try to eat three meals a day, plus two small snacks such as lowfat yogurt, cheese and fruit, or peanut butter and crackers. "This will keep your blood sugar stable and your hunger satiated and prevent you from reaching for food to relieve stress," says Kathleen Zelman, M.P.H., R.D., a nutrition consultant in Atlanta and director of nutrition for WebMD.

Exercise regularly

Aerobic exercise, such as brisk walking or jogging, triggers the release of endorphins and other feel-good chemicals, which improve your sense of well-being, Dr. Foreyt explains. "Feelings of well-being are incompatible with stress."

Consume lots of antioxidant-rich foods

"Antioxidants help protect your body from the harmful effects of stress," Dr. Christie says. To get enough vitamin A, C and E, aim to eat seven to nine servings of fruits and vegetables a day. Antioxidant powerhouses include blueberries, melons, nectarines, peaches, strawberries, papaya, carrots, broccoli, spinach and sweet potatoes.

Curb your caffeine intake

When under stress, some people drink coffee all day long to keep themselves going. It's a strategy that can backfire, Dr. Christie explains, because "caffeine actually mimics the stress response." In fact, a study at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, found that people who swallow 500 mg of caffeine a day (equal to two large servings of coffee) experience an increase in blood pressure, produce more stress hormones and feel 50 percent more stressed out until bedtime than on the days when they opt for decaf. While one or two servings of coffee or another caffeinated food or beverage (yes, **soda** and **chocolate** count) is probably fine, "don't pile it on," Dr. Christie says.

Create your own pressure-release valve

If you practice meditation, deep-breathing exercises or progressive muscle relaxation (in which you systematically tense then relax various muscle groups from head to toe) on a regular basis, you can lower your reactivity to stress in general and be armed with a stress-busting strategy when you really need it. A recent study at the Medical University of South Carolina found that relaxation training helped 10 adults with night-eating syndrome (a condition often triggered by stress in which people consume 50 percent or more of their daily food intake after 6 p.m.). Many different relaxation techniques work; the key is to find the right one for you. "You should try them all to see what best fits your psychological makeup," says Sandra Haber, Ph.D., a health psychologist in New York City and coauthor of *Finding Your Voice: A Woman's Guide to Using Self-Talk for Fulfilling Relationships, Work, and Life*. "If you find it engrossing and distracting, then it's a good choice for you."

Reference website: <http://www.everydayhealth.com/diet-nutrition/food-and-mood/stress-and-dieting/chronic-stress.aspx>

Acute Stress

By Stacey Colino

When you're caught off-guard by stressful situations, whether it's a traffic jam before an important meeting, an argument with your boss or a call from your child's school about his misbehavior, your best bet is to give yourself a time-out before reaching for that candy bar or bag of chips. Look at what happened and see if you can gain a better perspective on the situation or find a way to learn from it, Dr. Foreyt suggests. If a silver lining doesn't appear, put the scenario out of your mind for the moment and give yourself a breather. Here's how:

Pull the emotional escape hatch

Take a very deep breath, almost like an inward sigh, and then exhale slowly. Repeat this for a few minutes and as you do, go to a favorite place in your mind, Dr. Haber suggests, one that is serene and peaceful (the beach, the mountains or a place of your own invention). Notice the sights and sounds in that setting, the smells and physical sensations you'd experience there. "Stay there for a few moments and really appreciate the beauty and safety that is there," she says. "It will help you destress because you will have removed your senses from the current situation and given yourself a vacation from the problem at hand."

Have a cup of hot tea

"There's something nurturing or soothing about the warmth that eases tension and makes you feel calmer," Zelman says. If **tea** doesn't appeal to you, try a mug of chicken soup. "It'll remind you of what your mother fed you when you were sick as a child, when you felt cared for and comforted," Dr. Christie says.

Distract yourself

"Most cravings last about ten minutes, so if you can impose another activity for that long, the feeling is likely to pass," Dr. Foreyt says. Ask yourself if you're truly hungry. If you are, have a whole-grain snack, such as whole-wheat toast with peanut butter, or a filling drink like tomato juice; if you're not, divert your attention by calling a friend, playing a favorite CD or taking a walk. "After even a five- to ten-minute walk, you can come back feeling better able to regulate your mood," Zelman says.

Have a taste of what you crave

If the craving doesn't pass, your best bet may be to eat a small amount of what you want, e.g., a couple of Hershey's Kisses to put a **chocolate craving** to rest once and for all. "For acute stress, carbohydrates may have a temporary calming effect," Dr. Christie says, "and there's nothing wrong with having a small portion of chocolate occasionally. It's portion-control that's the main issue."

Speak kindly to yourself

Use affirmations or pep talks to help weather the emotional storm without eating. "Usually people catastrophize in an acutely stressful situation," Dr. Haber explains. "If you de-catastrophize by telling yourself, 'This isn't the end of the world,' or depersonalize the situation by telling yourself that your boss got upset because he's in a bad mood, you can get your balance back." To restore your sense of equilibrium, slowly repeat to yourself a soothing phrase such as "This isn't the end of the world" or "I can handle this." "We all react to stress as if everything were a fire," Dr. Haber explains. "If you have perspective, it helps you cope more calmly and not go off the deep end with food or anger."

Reference website: <http://www.everydayhealth.com/diet-nutrition/food-and-mood/stress-and-dieting/acute-stress.aspx>

Recurrent Stress

By Stacey Colino

Whether it strikes during family get-togethers or when you fight with your spouse, it may seem as though you're a victim of circumstances when dealing with recurrent stress. And at times like these, you may think it's impossible to exercise willpower. Not so. "Anything you can predict, you can control," Dr. Foreyt says. "Go through the situation in your mind and devise a plan to counteract what's happened in the past." If you know you're likely to overeat when your mother-in-law comes to visit, make sure you design survival strategies ahead of time to cope with her food-pushing ways or the tension you feel in her presence. Try these tactics:

Work out your stress beforehand

If you know **stress is heading your way**, try to exercise early in the day to promote feelings of well-being all day long. A series of studies at California State University, Long Beach concluded that exercise appears to be the most effective mood-regulating behavior.

Start a stress-eating diary

Jot down what foods you tend to eat when you're under stress and when you're likely to eat them, Dr. Christie suggests. "Once you know, plan ahead and have healthier alternatives or portion-controlled servings." Instead of chowing down on potato chips, you might have a small bowl of microwave popcorn; if what you crave is something creamy, you could have vanilla yogurt instead of ice cream.

Watch your alcohol intake

"Having one drink might help you relax, but more than that adds up to lots of extra calories, sleep loss and a headache in the morning," Zelman says. It can also make you feel worse about the situation at hand since alcohol often has a depressant effect.

Lean on a phone buddy

When you feel like you're at wits' end, sneak away and call a friend. "Social support can distract you from the stress and from eating," Dr. Christie says. "If you have a buddy who is a stress eater and understands what you're going through, maybe she can coach you through a tough moment and offer a perspective you haven't seen."

Forgive yourself

After fighting with your spouse, you caved in and ate that pint of Rocky Road ice cream. Big deal! Remind yourself that an occasional lapse won't wreck your weight-management goals, but self-flagellation just might. Instead of beating yourself up, let it slide and vow to get back on track with your next meal. "If you lose control and eat too much, use that experience as a guide for how to handle it the next time," says Dr. Foreyt. "The best thing you can do is learn from it."

Reference website: <http://www.everydayhealth.com/diet-nutrition/food-and-mood/stress-and-dieting/recurrent-stress.aspx>