

Managing in Tough Times



GOOD NUTRITION AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY: KEYS TO COPING WITH STRESS

Good nutrition and routine physical activity help keep you healthy and minimize the impact of stress to your body.

EAT RIGHT TO COPE WITH STRESS

Good nutrition and healthy eating behaviors help you respond to stressful situations by strengthening your immune system and improving your mood and overall well-being. Healthy eating does not have to be complicated. Prepare meals and snacks from a variety of sources:

- **Vegetables** — Dark green, red, orange, fresh, frozen or canned.
- **Fruits** — Fresh, frozen, canned or dried.
- **Grains** — Breads, pasta, breakfast cereals, tortillas, grits, oats, rice and popcorn. At least half of your grains should be whole grains.
- **Protein foods** — Lean meats, poultry, fish or other seafood, eggs, peanut butter, dry beans and peas, soy, nuts and seeds.
- **Dairy** — Fat free or low-fat milk or calcium/vitamin D fortified milk alternatives, yogurt and cheese.
- **Oils** — Canola, olive, other vegetable oils.

Choosing foods from these categories in the amounts that are right for you will likely provide you with the nutrients you need to remain healthy. Some people feel more confident when consuming a supplement as an additional source of nutrients. If this is you, purchase a standard multivitamin and mineral supplement. Large doses of some individual vitamins and minerals can be harmful.

It is also beneficial to:

- Eat your meals and snacks on a set schedule. This is good for your brain, good for your blood and good for your mood. Try not to skip meals, and try not to graze, or eat constantly, throughout the day.

- Try to make mealtimes relaxed and enjoyable.
- Choose or prepare snacks that are a good source of protein and fiber, such as nuts, yogurt, fruit, cut veggies, cereals, leftovers or certain snack bars.
- Avoid high fat and fried foods that may be difficult to digest.
- Reduce caffeine and alcohol intake. These chemicals can increase anxiety and blood pressure. They also interfere with sleep, which is essential for good health.
- Drink plenty of water.

STRESS AND “STRESS EATING” OR APPETITE LOSS EATING

Stress influences hunger and food choice. So, overeating and developing a preference for comfort foods — usually high-fat or high-sugar foods — is a common coping mechanism for stress. If this is you, try to reduce this need to eat by redirecting or distracting yourself. Follow this advice:

- Call a friend or talk to someone in your home.
- Take a walk or play a game with a pet.
- Try meditation, deep breathing or focusing on an unrelated activity, such as a puzzle or a piece of music.
- But just in case, keep low-fat, low-calorie snacks on hand and store the comfort foods out of immediate reach.

Some people lose their appetite when they are stressed. Because regular eating is important for stress management, these individuals might try to:

- Eat several small meals throughout the day.
- Try deep breathing, taking a walk, talking with a friend or just sitting quietly as a way to relax before attempting to eat.





EXERCISE TO COPE WITH STRESS

Exercise in practically any form improves your health and sense of well-being. Physical activity is known to:

- Help build and maintain bone mass, strengthen muscles and joints, and reduce stiffness.
- Increase lung capacity.
- Increase energy.
- Help lower blood pressure.
- Help manage weight.
- Help prevent constipation.
- Reduce risk of chronic disease (e.g., heart disease, diabetes and some cancers).
- Improve sleep and mood.
- Help reduce feelings of depression and anxiety.
- Improve concentration and mental focus.

WHAT'S THE BEST EXERCISE?

The best exercise for you is the activity that you enjoy and the one you can do and will do!

The Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans recommend a minimum of 150 to 300 minutes per week (approximately 30 to 60 minutes most days of the week) of moderate-intensity aerobic exercise for adults. Include muscle-strengthening activities on two or more days each week. Additional benefits might be gained by spending more than the minimum time being physically active each week. But research also tells us that any activity is better than no activity. Furthermore, you don't need to do all your exercise at one time. Several 10-minute sessions throughout the day should provide the same health benefits as one 30-minute session.

Once you have selected an exercise you enjoy, get started!

- Make it a routine.
- Increase exercise gradually.
- Warm up before and cool down after exercise.
- Drink water to remain hydrated.
- If you have to stop exercising for a while, start back slowly.

How well you cope with stress depends in part, on the choices you make. Choose healthy eating, and choose to be more physically active.

REFERENCE

Dietary Guidelines for Americans Eighth Edition. https://health.gov/sites/default/files/2019-09/2015-2020_Dietary_Guidelines.pdf

Physical Activities Guidelines for Americans. <https://www.hhs.gov/fitness/be-active/physical-activity-guidelines-for-americans/index.html>

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