

# How Stress Can Sabotage Your Diet

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## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Stress counteracts some of the benefits of a healthy diet
- › When women had low stress levels, they had higher markers of inflammation after eating an unhealthy meal but not after eating a healthy meal
- › When women were stressed out, their inflammation levels were elevated even when they ate a healthy meal
- › Women with a history of major depressive disorder also had higher post-meal blood pressure levels than women without a history of depression

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Your mental state, including negative emotions like stress as well as depression, and your diet alters levels of inflammation in your body.

Health problems such as obesity, insulin resistance, Type 2 diabetes, periodontal disease, stroke and heart disease are all rooted in inflammation, particularly chronic inflammation that festers out of control in your body.

Ordinarily, eating a healthy diet is one of the best ways to keep inflammation in check, but recent research suggests that even that isn't enough if you're also under stress.

## Does Stress Counteract the Benefits of a Healthy Diet?

A study of 58 women, published in the journal *Molecular Psychiatry*, showed the impacts of stress on health, even in the presence of healthy eating.<sup>1</sup>

The women were given two meals, one healthy and one not, and filled out questionnaires assessing symptoms of depression over the prior week and stressors over the past 24 hours. When women had low stress levels, they had higher markers of inflammation after eating an unhealthy meal but not after eating a healthy meal. When women were stressed out, however, their inflammation levels were elevated regardless of which meal they ate.

Women with a history of major depressive disorder also had higher post-meal blood pressure levels than women without a history of depression.

There are some issues with the study – namely the researchers' definition of what constitutes a healthy versus unhealthy meal – but the results showing that stress is associated with higher levels of inflammation are not surprising, nonetheless.

In a study published in 2015, the researchers also found daily stressors were associated with changes in metabolic responses that could make a person gain almost 11 pounds a year. "These findings illustrate how stress and depression alter metabolic responses to high-fat meals in ways that promote obesity," the researchers explained.<sup>2</sup>

## **Eating Junk Food While You're Stressed Will Compound the Problem**

The take-home message is certainly not that eating healthy is futile if you're feeling stressed out. [Certain healthy foods help to improve your mood](#) when you're stressed but, unfortunately, nearly 40% of Americans report overeating or eating unhealthy foods as a result of stress.<sup>3</sup>

This will only make matters worse. For instance, among a group of chronically stressed women (those caring for a spouse or parent with dementia), eating foods high in

unhealthy fats and sugar led to concerning health effects, including a larger waistline, increased abdominal fat, more oxidative damage and more insulin resistance.<sup>4</sup>

The combination of junk food and stress was particularly dangerous, as low-stress women who ate similar foods did not experience such profound changes over the course of the study. The study's lead author, Kirstin Aschbacher, Ph.D., an assistant professor in the department of psychiatry at the University of California, San Francisco, said:<sup>5</sup>

*"Many people think a calorie is a calorie, but this study suggests that two women who eat the same thing could have different metabolic responses based on their level of stress.*

*There appears to be a stress pathway that works through diet – for example, it could be similar to what we see in animals, where fat cells grow faster in response to junk food when the body is chronically stressed."*

## Why Stress Is So Detrimental to Your Health

Stress is a known trigger for systemic low-grade inflammation, and the fact that this negative emotional state counteracts some of the beneficial effects of healthy eating is revealing.

Stress clearly affects virtually your whole body, but according to neurobiologist Robert Sapolsky, Ph.D., in the documentary "[Stress: Portrait of a Killer](#)," the following are the most common health conditions that are caused by or worsened by stress:

Cardiovascular disease	Hypertension	Depression
Anxiety	Sexual dysfunction	Infertility and irregular cycles
Frequent colds	Insomnia and fatigue	Trouble concentrating

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Memory loss

Appetite changes

Digestive problems and  
dysbiosis

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Further, stress has a notable impact on your gut, including affecting movement and contractions in your gastrointestinal (GI) tract and increasing inflammation. It's not surprising that it also alters the benefits your body receives from healthy foods, as the stress response is also known to cause:<sup>6</sup>

- Decreased nutrient absorption
- Decreased oxygenation to your gut
- As much as four times less blood flow to your digestive system, which leads to decreased metabolism
- Decreased enzymatic output in your gut – as much as 20,000-fold!

## Antistress Foods to Add to Your Diet

Your diet supports or derails your positive mood, which is why when you're under stress it's especially important to eat well. One of the worst choices you can make is to go on a sugar binge, as sugar consumption promotes chronic inflammation.

In the long term, inflammation disrupts the normal functioning of your immune system, which is linked to a greater risk of depression. Sugar (particularly fructose) and grains also contribute to insulin and leptin resistance and impaired signaling, which play a significant role in your mental health.

So what should you eat when you're under a great deal of stress? Here are some top antistress foods to consider.

1. **Green leafy vegetables** – Dark leafy greens like spinach are rich in folate, which helps your body produce mood-regulating neurotransmitters like dopamine. One 2012 study found people who consumed the most folate had a lower risk of depression than those who ate the least.<sup>7</sup>

Not to mention, research from the University of Otago found eating fruits and vegetables of any sort helped young adults calm their nerves.<sup>8</sup>

- 2. Fermented foods** – Unhealthy gut flora have a detrimental impact on your brain health, leading to issues like anxiety and **depression**. Beneficial bacteria have a direct effect on brain chemistry, transmitting mood- and behavior-regulating signals to your brain via your vagus nerve.

For instance, the probiotic *Lactobacillus rhamnosus* was found to have a marked effect on GABA levels in certain brain regions and lowered the stress-induced hormone corticosterone, resulting in reduced anxiety- and depression-related behavior.<sup>9</sup>

- 3. Wild-caught Alaskan salmon, sardines and anchovies** – Found in **salmon**, sardines and **anchovies**, or supplement form, such as krill oil, the animal-based omega-3 fats EPA and DHA play a role in your emotional well-being.

One study in *Brain Behavior and Immunity* showed a dramatic 20% reduction in anxiety among medical students taking omega-3,<sup>10</sup> while past research has shown omega-3 fats work just as well as antidepressants in preventing the signs of depression, but without any of the side effects.

However, remember that too much omega-3 intake is just as problematic as getting too little, as omega-3 is a polyunsaturated fatty acid (PUFA). When consumed in excessive quantities, omega-3 will cause metabolic damage similar to that of omega-6 **linoleic acid** (LA), as it too breaks down into dangerous metabolites known as ALEs (advanced lipoxidation end products).

## **A Simple Tool to Deal with Daily Stress**

If you don't address stress daily, it will quickly snowball out of control, impacting your mental and physical health and your ability to be productive and enjoy life. While an

occasional stress response is normal and even healthy, ongoing, constant stress is not – and it's this latter type that should be dealt with on an ongoing basis.

There are many ways to do this, and you may have several stress-reduction methods you currently rely on. Exercise, meditation, engaging in a hobby you enjoy or even petting your dog or cat all apply, but it's helpful to have a tool you can pull out whenever stress starts to feel overwhelming (or, ideally, before it even gets to that point).

Using energy psychology techniques such as the [Emotional Freedom Techniques \(EFT\)](#) is one such option, which helps reprogram your body's reactions to the unavoidable stressors of everyday life, thereby reducing your chances of experiencing adverse health effects.

EFT is similar to acupuncture, which is based on the concept that a vital energy flows through your body along invisible pathways known as meridians. EFT, however, involves no needles; instead, you stimulate different energy meridian points in your body by tapping them with your fingertips, while simultaneously using custom-made verbal affirmations.

This can be done alone or under the supervision of a qualified EFT therapist. By doing so, you help your body eliminate emotional "scarring" and reprogram the way your body responds to emotional stressors.

Since these stressors are usually connected to physical problems, your physical symptoms improve or disappear as well. For a demonstration, please see the video above featuring EFT practitioner Julie Schiffman, in which she discusses EFT for stress relief.

EFT works best when combined with other healthy lifestyle choices, including high-quality sleep, exercise and a healthy diet. Together, these elements make up the foundational requirements your body needs to bounce back from stressful events.

## Sources and References

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