

# WHICH CAME FIRST — FOOD OR STRESS?

## Key steps toward making your life easier to manage

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When it comes to the relationship between food and stress, it's a classic example of the "chicken or the egg" conundrum. What we eat influences how our brains and body manage stress, and being stressed for long periods can lead us straight to the candy bar aisle and to overeat. Stress, the hormones it unleashes and the effects of high-fat, sugary "comfort foods" can push people toward overeating.

No matter what stage of life you are at, it's likely you will experience stress on a regular basis. Some stress can be good, perhaps inspiring you to make changes in your life or motivate you, yet getting stressed too often and staying stressed for too long takes a toll on your body. Remaining stressed for too long can lead to health issues ranging from weight gain to increased inflammation to elevated blood sugar.

Yet it isn't just our environments or tough situations that cause stress — certain foods can have the same negative impact on our body. If you want to reduce your stress levels and reduce your risk of disease, resolve to decrease or

eliminate the following foods: sugar, processed carbohydrates, alcohol and excess caffeine.

This may seem like a daunting task — and it can be — but if you tackle one thing at a time, you can build better eating habits that will improve your overall resilience and health.

### SUGAR

Sugar seems to be in everything these days, from ketchup to bottled dressing to bread, so it's a difficult but important ingredient to try to reduce in your diet. When you eat sugary foods, blood sugar levels spike and the body must release cortisol to help balance your blood sugar. But increased cortisol can cause a host of problems, including sleep problems, decreased immune response, headaches and even more cravings for sugary foods.

Eliminate foods with added sugars like pastries, sodas, sugary coffee drinks and desserts and substitute a piece of fresh or dried fruit instead. The best part is that decreasing sugary foods will almost immediately make you feel better and more energetic.

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**PROCESSED CARBOHYDRATES**

Following closely behind the effects of added sugar are those of highly processed carbohydrate foods like white bread, white rice and pasta. They have little nutritional value, while leading to fluctuating blood sugar levels that can leave you feeling moody and irritable. These empty-calorie foods are often inexpensive but not as filling as their whole-grain alternatives, so we eat larger portions of them, thus not really helping our budget or our health.

The fiber in whole-grain alternatives such as brown rice, whole-grain pasta and whole-wheat breads take longer to digest and are much easier on our blood sugar levels.

**ALCOHOL**

A glass of wine might help you feel better at the end of the day, but drinking more than this negates any health benefits and instead adds even more stress to your life. Alcohol increases the production of hormones that can leave you feeling more anxious and stressed than before you drank. In addition, many alcoholic drinks are loaded with sugar, again causing havoc on your blood sugar levels, and can interrupt your deep sleep cycles, leaving you more cranky and stressed the next morning.

**EXCESS CAFFEINE**

A few cups of coffee in the morning for most people won't cause undue stress, but if you're overdoing it, you may find yourself feeling more stressed and anxious than you'd like. Too much caffeine stimulates the nervous system, can raise blood pressure and heart rate leading to increased anxiety. In addition, the pervasiveness of heavily sweetened coffee or energy drinks

during the day turns caffeine into a double whammy for your blood sugar and mood.

On the other side of the spectrum, researchers are just beginning to discover that what you eat can actually change your brain's ability to regulate food intake. Researchers at the University of Washington fed mice a high-fat diet for 12 weeks and, as the mice became obese, the researchers found that neurons within their brains progressively lost their "brakes," or the capacity to pass along signals of fullness.

In other words, our brain's natural eating inhibitors might lose their sway over time as we continue to overindulge. A junk food meal may be fine now and then, but having them more frequently may make it much more difficult to lose weight.

There are two simple strategies to help you begin making healthier changes, the "perimeter" strategy and the "five ingredients" rule.

**THE 'PERIMETER' STRATEGY**

If it's not in your cupboard, you can't eat it. Food manufacturers use every chemical, physical and marketing trick in the book to get us to overeat, so it's important not only to be aware of the power of these foods to draw us in, but also how to outsmart them.

The perimeter strategy helps you avoid processed and packaged foods at the grocery store by sticking to the perimeter of the store and only occasionally heading down the aisles. If you limit yourself to buying foods on the perimeter, you will generally buy whole foods such as fruits, vegetables, meats, eggs, etc.

**THE 'FIVE INGREDIENTS' RULE**

Not everything on the perimeter is healthy, but by following the "five ingredients" strategy, it becomes even

easier to find the healthier choices. If something has more than five ingredients in it, don't buy it. Odds are, it has been designed to fool you into eating more of it with added sodium, preservatives and sugars.

Finally, find a better way to deal with your stress besides eating: Take a short walk outdoors, have a chat with a friend or neighbor, spend a few minutes doing yoga or gentle stretching, or read a good book. These steps will be much better for your physical and mental health, while leaving you feeling energized and calmer to face the world.

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**Use the chart below to guide your snacking choices as you go into the new year. Address eating habits you would like to change one at a time to improve your chance of success.**

**HEALTHIER ALTERNATIVES TO "STRESS SNACKING"**

INSTEAD OF	CHOOSE
A candy bar	A few pieces of dark chocolate <i>(75% cocoa or darker)</i>
Ice Cream	Frozen yogurt pops
Milkshakes	Homemade smoothies
Candy	Chocolate dipped nuts
Soda	Fruity sparkling water
Burgers	Grilled chicken, turkey or salmon burger
Fried chicken wings	Baked chicken wings or legs
Chips <i>(Potato, corn or other fried salty snack)</i>	Popcorn
Fries	Baked sweet potato fries
Traditional dips	Veggies and hummus