

# The Right Nutrients: Better than Prozac to Beat Stress

By Clare Fleishman

Holidays bring stress and rich food; together they create a surefire recipe for weight gain. But with a few simple substitutions, you can make food part of the solution instead of the problem.

Foods target stress in several ways:

Comfort foods, such as a mug of hot cocoa or a bowl of oatmeal, boost levels of calming brain chemicals.

Other foods reduce levels of cortisol and adrenaline, stress hormones that take a toll on the body over time.

And finally, a nutritious diet can counteract the impact of stress by shoring up the immune system, decreasing inflammation and lowering blood pressure.

When “Managing Your Mind & Mood through Food” was published in 1987, I was intrigued. Here was a revolutionary theory in the staid nutrition field: food could make us happy, relaxed, energetic, or focused. I already knew that eating too much chocolate cake could make me fairly depressed. Yet author Judith Wurtman, Massachusetts Institute of Technology researcher and no scientific lightweight, was purporting all sorts of crazy stuff: she was spinning mealtime like a mood ring. As the decades have sped by, her book has only garnered more acceptances. Wurtman writes that the right food at the right time in the right amount is as effective as a tranquilizer (quaint term for Valium and its ilk) for the acute stresses of daily life.

Carbohydrates work best, she says, and here’s why: they increase the levels of an amino acid called tryptophan which

in turn increases serotonin, a compound which induces calm in the brain. A big wedge of chocolate cake is not advised here; a small bran muffin with honey perhaps or a piece of fruit is better.

Protein, on the other hand, has the opposite immediate effect: it keeps us awake and alert. I always served my children an omelet or scrambled eggs the morning before a big test; in addition to whites which are full of protein, yolks are rich in choline, another plus for enriching memory. Even if they didn’t know all the answers, those kids weren’t snoozing.

*Chronic stress*—the kind that leads to obesity—and its management takes more planning than cracking a few eggs. Here are some helpful guidelines:

--Caffeine, alcohol, trans fats and saturated fats should be avoided to minimize inflammation.

--Trans fats and saturated fats can be avoided by limiting meat, whole milk products and processed crackers, cookies and cakes. And beware of bakery products which are almost guaranteed to be full of bad fats.

--Dark chocolate has flavonoids. Make sure your treat comes with 70% or more cacao. Only a small piece is needed for benefits.

--Tea, especially chamomile, fights anxiety.

--Vitamin C keeps colds offshore, and the vitamin also seems to return cortisol and

adrenaline back to normal after a stressful event. Think beyond orange juice for your daily dose; the following contain even more Vitamin C than an orange: one bell pepper, one cup of strawberries, one kiwifruit, one cup of broccoli or Brussels sprouts or half of a papaya.

--Oatmeal is a perfect carbohydrate to boost the calming brain chemical serotonin because it's high in fiber and won't mess with blood sugar levels. Whole grain crackers and rice cakes also work well.

--Omega 3 fatty acids help to reduce stress. It's widely accepted that the ratio of Q6:Q3 in the daily diet should be in balance—the optimum ratio and recommendations vary from country to country with Japan advising 2:1 and Sweden advising 5:1. The average American diet, which is low in fish, is estimated to be 8:1 to 12:1 with some as high as 25:1. Emerging evidence suggests that fish consumption has a protective effect on mental health due to the omega-3 fatty acid content. These shorter chain fatty acids replace long-chain omega-6 fatty acids, particularly arachidonic acid which is key for the synthesis of proinflammatory eicosanoids and cytokines which can adversely impact brain function. Salmon, sardines, and herring are good sources of omega-3 fatty acids. One small can of sardines--a perfect picnic food--supplies a generous amount, as much as three fish oil capsules.

--Nuts: Though all nuts are nutritious to some extent, walnuts are the darlings right now. Preliminary analyses suggest walnut supplementation alters stress signals. It appears that linolenic acid is

effective in lowering stress signals such as cytokines and nuclear factor B. Sprinkle nuts in salads or on top of soups. Or eat as a snack.

--Phytotherapy is science-based herbal medicine. Many countries have approval systems to evaluate and regulate claims and production of herbals as preventives or treatments. At present, the Food and Drug Administration or FDA in the United States classifies herbals as dietary supplements. Germany is a leader in herbal medicine and it is incorporated into conventional medicine there. Phytomedicines comprise about 30 percent of all drugs sold in German pharmacies. These are a few of the herbs which have been used for stress-reduction:

Ginseng- The Chinese have been using it for over 2000 years. It is given all sorts of powers including roles in stamina, maintaining blood sugar levels, cancer, colds and sexual prowess. The actual dose recommended varies by country but a reputable producer should have information on the label.

Kava kava --a member of the pepper family, this herb reduced anxiety, muscle tension relative to placebo. However, evidence of liver toxicity, though rare, should at present discount the use of this for its anti-stress qualities.

And finally, every diet should be rich in probiotics which reduce inflammation and boost the immune system. These microbes which populate every nook of your digestive tract and more are unsung bugs which create good health and can minimize stress. Unless your diet solely consists of burgers and fries, you probably already consume probiotics in

this popular food: yogurt. However, these foods should also be added to your diet: sauerkraut, kimchee, pickles, buttermilk, labneh. If you see the common link here, congratulations, you are an amateur microbiologist. Yes, fermentation produces probiotics. Adding these foods to your menus will relieve some of the stress of the holidays. That, along with a week at the Red Sea, should do the trick.