

# PRESS ARTICLE

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## FOOD, MOOD & METABOLISM

### *How to Stress-Proof Your Diet*

*By Christina Jordan*

Can stress make you fat? For years, many people have suspected that stress and obesity are linked — and now scientific research has found evidence to support this connection. As doctors better understand these reasons, they may be better able to address the obesity epidemic facing the United States. What you eat can have an effect on your mood and metabolism. We turned to one of Arizona’s leading weight loss doctors, Dr. SUZANNE BENTZ, for help to better understand what food you should eat to boost your energy and battle the negative effects of stress.

“The most dangerous aspect of the link between stress and obesity is that it tends to be self-reinforcing”, notes Dr. Bentz, the Medical Director of Red Mountain Weight Loss and who is certified in Bariatric Medicine, which deals with the treatment of obesity and other related diseases. "Very often, when people are over stressed they may eat improperly," Bentz says. "If the bad eating causes them to gain weight, then that can cause even more stress. In the end, you wind up causing exactly what you're trying to avoid all together."

### **Stress and Obesity: The Biological Connection**

Ever notice that when you're exceedingly stressed, you tend to crave comfort foods that are high in fat, carbohydrates or sugar? Medical researchers have found that the following hormones may play a key role in this process.

#### **Serotonin**

When we reach for fattening, comfort foods during stressful times; it may be an attempt to self-medicate. "When you eat carbohydrates, it raises the body's serotonin level," Bentz says. “Serotonin is the body’s feel-good chemical, the body’s mood elevator.” Not surprisingly, people under high stress tend to not make healthy food choices. Very often

the comfort food that people go for are laden with fat; like muffins, pastries, doughnuts, and cookies.

### **Cortisol**

Researchers have also discovered that chronic stress can cause the body to release excess cortisol; a hormone critical in managing fat storage and energy used in the human body. Cortisol is known to increase appetite and may encourage cravings for sugary or fatty foods.

### **Neuropeptide Y**

More recent studies also suggest that our bodies may process food differently when we're under high stress. One study found that lab mice fed a diet high in fat and sugar gained significant amounts of body fat when placed under stressful conditions. Mice fed a normal diet, however, didn't gain as much weight despite stress. Researchers linked that phenomenon to a molecule called neuropeptide Y that is released from nerve cells during stress and encourages fat accumulation. A diet high in fat and sugar appears to further promote the release of neuropeptide Y.

Dr. Bentz encourages that by making a few simple adjustments to your diet, you can elevate your stressful mood and boost your metabolism. The benefits are huge: Maintaining a good mood will help you stick to a healthy diet, be more productive, and increase your self-esteem during stressful times. Metabolism is the process your body uses to break down food. "Ensuring your metabolism is working most effectively will help you feel your best and energized to get the most out of life," explains Dr. Bentz.

### **Here are some simple tips to help you optimize your diet to boost mood and metabolism.**

#### **1. Resist Skipping Meals**

Skipping or missing a meal can cause a dip in your blood sugar, leading to moodiness and lethargy. Maintain your blood sugar levels, and your energy, by eating small amounts of food throughout the day. You might even prefer eating six smaller meals rather than three large ones.

#### **2. Stay Hydrated**

Dehydration can also make you feel sluggish and lethargic. Be sure to drink lots of water throughout the day, and don't rely on thirst alone to remind you to have another glass of water. The average person needs about eight to ten glasses of water, and that may be hard to drink without reminders.

#### **3. Think Moderation, Especially for Low-Nutrient Foods**

Avoid a lot of caffeine, refined carbohydrates (sugar), alcohol, salt, and other food additives. Any of these, especially in large amounts, can decrease your metabolic efficiency. Eating large quantities of carbohydrates and sugars tend to cause an energy rush and then a big crash; this can lead to crankiness and fatigue. Excess salt can disrupt

your fluid balance, changing your daily water needs, not to mention increasing health risks like high blood pressure.

#### **4. Strive for Balance in Your Food**

Properly combine protein, carbohydrates, and fat to achieve a balanced energy intake. In general, a healthy diet includes a mix of fruits and vegetables, protein and some whole grains but each person has individual needs based on age, sex, physical activity level, body size, and stress factors. To find out the best foods for you, consult a weight loss doctor who can help you determine the right balance for your body type.

#### **5. Get a Big Boost From “Good Mood” Food**

While research about the mood- and metabolism-boosting qualities of certain foods is mixed, foods high in the amino acid tryptophan can increase serotonin levels in the brain, contributing to feelings of optimism and calm. Try adding some bananas, avocados, walnuts, sunflower seeds, or pumpkin seeds for some extra tryptophan. Polyunsaturated omega-3 fats help elevate mood and reduce anxiety and depression. Look for omega-3-rich fish, like salmon and mackerel and swap out the high-calorie or high-fat snacks in your diet for healthier alternatives. Fresh fruits, low-fat string cheese, low-fat cottage cheese, and green vegetables are some good options. Create snacks that combine carbohydrates and proteins, like a slice of string cheese with apple slices, as they will make you feel full longer and provide nutrients that help your body feel good.

#### **6. Keep a Food Diary**

Some foods can have the opposite effect of tryptophan and instead trigger negative changes in mood and cause irritability or headaches. If you think a particular food might be affecting your mood, start a food diary. Record all the foods you eat each day and how you feel before and after every meal. After two weeks, review your entries to see if any foods line up with specific moods, either good or bad. You can then eliminate or limit those foods that cause negative side effects.

#### **7. Manage Your Stress**

Dealing with stress may be easier said than done, but finding ways to manage your stress is essential to your overall health and weight loss goals. Try yoga, tai chi, daily walks or meditation. Exercise regularly. Spend time with friends. Seek counseling. Do whatever is needed to reduce the number of stress factors in your life.

#### **8. Ask For Help**

If you find yourself reaching for high fat, sugary snacks when you're feeling stressed, know that you're not alone. Millions suffer from stress induced eating. Fortunately though, you can break this cycle. If finding ways to minimize stress in your life and focus on making better food choices is not enough, you can always turn to a weight loss doctor to help you along the way. Stress may be a part of life, but it doesn't have to lead to weight gain.

For more information about the different medically supervised weight loss programs offered at Red Mountain Weight Loss, please visit [www.redmountainweightloss.com](http://www.redmountainweightloss.com) or feel free to contact them at one of their locations:

West Valley - 602-863-4046

Mesa - 480-854-4872

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