

18 Superfoods for Stress Relief

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A healthy diet can work wonders in preventing and reducing symptoms that are caused by stress. There are certain foods that can act as excitants or stimulants and due to their adrenalin increasing properties cause more stress. On the other hand there are some foods that will help in providing energy and better bowel movement among other benefits that help in dealing with stress situations.

Also, under stress, our body gets depleted of essential stress fighting nutrients like vitamin B, vitamin C, Calcium, Magnesium and Potassium. If these are not replenished immediately, it can cause the body to change the way it functions to preserve its reserves. Fatigue and weak immune system are among the first to be noticed.

Before we come to foods that help in managing stress, we will first take a short look at the kind of foods to avoid – the foods that increase stress or help stress.

Foods to Avoid

The items that you need to avoid in your food during stressful periods are **alcohol, caffeine, sugar, salt, fat and junk foods**.

Alcohol causes Adrenalin to be produced in excess causing problems related to the nervous system, irritation and sleepless nights. It harms the body by creating an internal environment where fat deposits are formed in the heart. It also weakens the immune system of the body and attacks the liver and mars its capability of removing toxins from the system.

Sugar is nothing but calories. It gives instant energy putting a lot of load on the adrenal glands. Our body has to use its resources (vitamins and minerals) to process it. Excess sugar in the system also requires the pancreas to work overtime increasing the chances of diabetes. Many classify sugar as a drug rather than food.

Salt increases blood pressure levels and can be reduced by avoiding processed foods like pickles, bacon, sausages and the like.

Although our body needs fats for optimum functioning, excess of it followed by a sedentary lifestyle increases obesity and cardiac problems. They also put more stress on the digestive system.

Junk foods like white bread, fries, are devoid of essential nutrients and the body has to use its reserve of nutrients to digest them. They also lack fiber, thereby putting a lot of stress on the body in eliminating them. Moreover, like sugar, they are quickly assimilated, putting a lot of load on the adrenal glands.

Considering the damage the above foods do to our body, it is a wise choice to limit these foods even when one is not under stress.

Foods to Prefer

Nuts and Seeds

Nuts and seeds are energy powerhouses. In addition to that, they are rich in various vitamins and minerals.

Almonds – Almonds are powerful anti-oxidants and including them regularly in diet reduces oxidative stress levels to a great degree. Almonds are also good sources of vitamins like E and B2. To improve the digestive value, one can soak few Almonds in water over-night and have them in the morning. It improves the taste too.

Pistachios - Studies have shown that consuming Pistachios on a regular basis helps to reduce the body's response to stress. They are also found to lower cholesterol and reduce risks of heart disease.

Walnuts - Walnuts contain alpha-linolenic acid (ALA), an essential Omega-3 fatty acid, and other polyphenols that act as antioxidants. They keep your cholesterol levels in check and help raise HDL (good cholesterol) levels.

Sesame Seeds – Sesame seeds are rich sources of stress-relieving minerals like Calcium and Magnesium. They also lubricate joints and prevent inflammation of joints. Sesame oil is one of the basic ingredients in majority of massage oils.

Flax Seeds - These are rich in Omega 3 fatty acids and help lower total and LDL (low-density lipoprotein) cholesterol and thus reduce the risk of heart disease. Flax seeds are also powerful anti-oxidants. Flax seeds can be ground and stored in refrigerator. It can be had just like that or sprinkled over salads or mixed with Jaggery. Please note that ground flax seeds turns rancid quickly. Hence ground and store only small amounts at a time and use it within a week.

***Note:** Nuts and seeds are rich in energy and fats and hence must be consumed in moderation. Excess consumption may cause constipation and weight gain.*

Vegetables

The production of Serotonin, which is soothing for the body, is increased with high absorption of an amino acid called L- Tryptophan. Natural forms of L- Tryptophan are found in vegetables. Though some people argue that L- Tryptophan is present in meats also, the fact of the matter is that meat also contains many other complex amino acids that compete with the absorption of L- Tryptophan.

Dark green and yellow vegetables are also rich sources of phytochemicals that modulate stress.

Spinach – Spinach are rich sources of Magnesium, which helps regulate Cortisol levels (stress hormone). They are also full of antioxidants, Folic Acid and Beta Carotene.

Broccoli – Broccoli are very rich in stress relieving B vitamins, Folic Acid, antioxidants and Calcium (helps relax muscles).

Fruits

Whole fruits (not canned or processed juice) have a cleansing effect on the body and they help the body get rid of toxins, which is usually found in elevated levels when body is under stress. They are also rich in vitamins and minerals.

Apples – Apples are rich in soluble fiber and helps relieve constipation. Apple also contains Quercetin, which is a powerful antioxidant, anti-histamine and anti-inflammatory. “An Apple a Day Keeps a Doctor Away” indeed holds true.

Bananas – Bananas are rich in vitamin B6, vitamin C, fiber, potassium and carbohydrates. Potassium helps normalize heart beat and is essential in maintaining water balance in the body.

Oranges – Just like Gooseberries, Oranges are rich sources of vitamin C.

Gooseberries (Amla) – Gooseberries are one of the richest sources of vitamin C. Studies have shown that those who have high levels of vitamin C are better able to cope with stress than those who don't. Moreover, they also do not exhibit the mental and physical signs of stress when under stressful conditions. Gooseberries also form one of the three ingredients of the famous Ayurvedic medicine Triphala.

Gooseberry Jam recipe: Here's a simple recipe that you can use to make Gooseberry jam and have everyday with breakfast.

Take about 500 gms fresh Gooseberry. Wash it thoroughly and de-seed it. Puree it in blender or mixer. Mix the puree with double the quantity of Jaggery. You can use raw Sugar if Jaggery is not available but Jaggery is highly recommended. Heat the mixture and bring it to boil. Lower the flame and cook for around 15 minutes, stirring regularly. Cool, store in bottles and refrigerate. Have a spoonful of this yummy and full of vitamin C jam everyday!

Blueberries – Blueberries are chockfull of antioxidants and vitamin C, which help manage stress.

Avocados – Avocados are very rich in Potassium, which helps to lower blood pressure. Just half an Avocado contains as much Potassium as a medium-size Banana.

***Note:** Fruits and vegetables must form the majority of your diet. One must try to include a variety of them and not just limit to a few, as different colored fruits and vegetables contain different nutrients, phytochemicals and antioxidants.*

Complex Carbohydrates

Carbohydrates help the brain to make more serotonin, which provides a calming and soothing effect. However, simple carbohydrates like refined flour (white bread, sweets) provide instant energy, putting load on adrenal glands and causing mood swings. Therefore diet should comprise more of complex carbohydrates like whole grains which are digested slowly thereby giving sustained energy and a feeling of fullness.

Oatmeal – Oats are natural anti-depressants because of their high amounts of B vitamins, Calcium, Magnesium, Potassium and antioxidants. They are also rich sources of soluble fiber, which helps to reduce cholesterol.

Finger Millet (Raagi) – A native of African and Asian countries, this is very rich in Calcium, one of the key minerals that helps in reducing irritability and help relax muscles.

Brown Rice – Rice bran is rich source of B vitamins and the white rice we consume on a regular basis is devoid of most of the nutrients including B vitamins. Parboiled rice (rice that has been boiled in the husk) comes next to Brown rice in terms of nutrient density. Parboiling rice drives nutrients, especially thiamine, from the bran into the grain, so that parboiled white rice is 80% nutritionally similar to Brown rice.

Other Foods

Fatty and Oily Fish – Fatty and oily fish like Salmon, Mackerel and Herring are rich sources of Omega 3 fatty acids, which keeps stress hormones from spiraling. Omega 3 also helps lower LDL and prevents risk of stroke. If you don't like fish, you may also consider taking Fish Oil supplements.

Yoghurt – Chronic stress upsets the balance of friendly bacteria in the gastrointestinal tract. As a result, synthesis of B vitamins is affected, which are key elements in keeping stress under control. Probiotic foods like Yoghurt help restore the balance of these friendly bacteria in the GI tract. Having them after food also gives a kind of fullness thereby reducing cravings usually associated with stress.

Prolonged stress, combined with a weak or wrong diet, can then cause more serious problems like digestive problems, rapid aging, blood pressure changes, insomnia and so on.

Having a balanced and sensible diet with more emphasis of foods rich in stress fighting nutrients can certainly help a long way in negating the dangerous effects of stress on the body.

Peace, health and happiness,

Vishal P. Rao

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