



# What's the Tea?



## Feeding Our Feelings:

### The Tea on Stress Eating

April is National Stress Awareness Month, which has been recognized every April since 1992. With the COVID-19 pandemic still present and finals just around the corner, it seems particularly important to take the time this National Stress Awareness Month to discuss how stress can impact what and how we eat and how we can manage stress in healthy ways through diet and lifestyle changes.

Do you have a go-to comfort food when you feel stressed? Cookies? Ice cream? Chocolate? Potato chips? Salad? Okay, probably not the last one. If you do find yourself feeding your feelings, you are not alone. The reason is that our bodies produce both psychological and physiological responses to stress. One of the most common psychological responses is emotional eating, or stress eating, where we use food to suppress or soothe negative emotions. Indulging in a particular food when we feel sad, frustrated, fearful, tired or stressed is an act of seeking food for comfort.

The unfortunate reality however, is that stress eating can actually make things worse in the long-run. Many of us tend to reach for foods that are high in calories, saturated fats and added sugars during times of stress. When you are caught in the heat of a stressful moment, you can make unhealthy food choices or simply overeat. This may then result in feelings of shame or regret afterwards when you reflect back on the food choices you made, creating a negative cycle of emotions and food which is not productive or healthy.

The best way to combat stress eating is to be mindful of what triggers your stress eating. Using a food diary to record what, when and how you feel when you eat can help identify stress triggers. So the next time you find yourself reaching for food mindlessly, ask yourself, "Am I really hungry?" It is important to be mindful of hunger cues, such as a growling stomach, headache and low energy, so that you can honor your hunger but avoid eating unnecessarily due to stress.

If you are truly hungry, ask yourself, "Why am I reaching for food?" and "How do I feel right now?" By understanding what prompts the desire to eat, you can learn to anticipate challenging moments and work through them without using food as a crutch.

Once you determine your stress eating triggers, it's important to embrace new ways to manage stress that are more permanent solutions. Activities that can alleviate stress in healthy ways include journaling, meditation, getting a good night's sleep, yoga, running or discussing your problems with a parent, friend or another trusted source such as a psychologist, social worker or counselor. Consider the Counseling and Mental Health Center's free **Mindful Eating Program** for help with difficulties in turning to food or eating mindlessly to manage stress. Additional information and resources for managing stress can be found on the **CMHC website**.

A healthy, well-balanced diet can reduce the negative impacts of stress on the body by strengthening the immune system, stabilizing mood and reducing blood pressure. Unfortunately, there are no specific foods or supplements that will magically make stress disappear. Limited research exists linking certain nutrients to stress management, such as antioxidants, B vitamins and vitamin D. Additionally despite some supplements claiming to help manage stress, the evidence supporting these supplements is limited and much more research is needed. Instead, choose a balanced, healthful eating style that includes lean proteins, fiber-rich whole grains, low-fat dairy and a colorful variety of fruits and vegetables each and every day.

So while stress and diet seem like they work against one another, in reality they can work together in harmony for better health. When we eat a healthier diet, our body can manage stress better. When we are able to manage our stress efficiently, we tend to eat more intuitively and make healthier choices.

— Lindsay Wilson, MS, RD, LD



## Dietitian's Dish

### Trail Mix Popcorn

**Yields: 8 servings**

Popcorn is a delicious and versatile snack option during stressful times – the crunching can help relieve muscle tension in your face and jaw, while its carbohydrates will spike serotonin, a relaxing neurotransmitter that helps regulate mood. Replace the typical butter and salt toppings with nuts or seeds, dried fruit and dried herbs or spices for a twist on traditional trail mix. Mix and match toppings to satisfy cravings in a sensible way.

#### Ingredients

- 1 brown paper lunch bag
- 1/4 cup popcorn kernels
- 1/2 cup almonds
- 1/2 cup dried cranberries
- 1/2 cup sunflower seeds
- 1/2 tsp cinnamon

#### Directions

1. Pour the popcorn kernels directly into the brown paper bag then fold the top of the bag over twice to seal.
2. Microwave on high for 2 to 3 minutes, or until you hear pauses of about 2 seconds between pops.
3. Carefully open the bag once the popping has stopped and add the almonds, dried cranberries, sunflower seeds, cinnamon and dark chocolate chips (optional).
4. Fold the top of the bag over and shake well to combine.

Have a tasty recipe to share? Submit your recipe to [dietitian@austin.utexas.edu](mailto:dietitian@austin.utexas.edu) for a chance to get featured in our next edition.



## Ask the Expert



**Q:**  
How does stress affect your appetite?

**A:**  
During short term stress, our bodies release corticotropin-releasing hormone and epinephrine, which both suppress appetite. But if stress persists for longer periods of time, another hormone is released, called cortisol. Cortisol is meant to protect the body during stress, but it also causes an increase in appetite. Once a stressful situation concludes, cortisol levels should decrease and our appetite returns to normal. However, if the stress doesn't go away, an increased appetite may result in increased food consumption, fat storage and weight gain.

It is important that we engage in healthy stress management practices. When it comes to food and stress, maintaining a consistent balanced and healthy eating style can reduce the negative effects of stress on the body. Additional resources for managing stress can be found from **Healthy Horns**.

Submit your nutrition-related questions to [dietitian@austin.utexas.edu](mailto:dietitian@austin.utexas.edu) and our experts may answer you in a future edition.

## Nourishing Noms



### Feature Food: Corn

When corn is harvested dictates its nutritional value and culinary use, which in turn determines whether it is a grain or a vegetable:

- Fresh corn is considered a starchy vegetable when it is harvested while it is soft and has kernels full of liquid, making it ideal for cooking and eating on or cut off the cob.
- Dry corn that is harvested when fully mature is considered a grain, as it can be milled to make cornmeal for tortillas, cornbread and polenta.
- Corn used for popcorn is harvested when mature and is therefore also a whole grain.



### Nutrition Facts

- Corn is low in total fat and is a good source of niacin, dietary fiber, manganese and vitamin B6.

### Selection & Storage

- Choose fresh ears of corn with green husks, fresh silks and tight rows of kernels.
- Refrigerate corn with husks on for use as soon as possible or within 1-2 days.

### Fun Facts

- In an ear of corn, there is one silk for every kernel and the number of kernels per ear can vary from 500 to about 1,200, but a typical ear would have 800 kernels in 16 rows.

