A monthly nutrition and wellness newsletter
brought to you by University Housing and Dining.

**What's the Tea?**

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 the act of 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 unhealthy 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 can work against one another. In reality, we tend to eat more intuitively and make healthier choices. 

The best way to combat stress eating is to be mindful of what triggers your stress eating. Using a food diary to record what you eat and 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 that can help manage stress and work more efficiently by changing your habits. Additional resources for managing stress can be found on the CMHC website.

Conversation

**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.

*Fold the top of the bag over and shake well to combine.*

*Pour the popcorn kernels directly into the brown paper bag then fold the top of the bag over twice to seal.*

*Microwave on high for 2 to 3 minutes, or until you hear pauses of about 2 seconds between pops.*

*Have a tasty recipe to share? Submit your recipe to dietitian@austin.utexas.edu for a chance to get featured in our next edition.*

**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**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1 brown paper lunch bag</th>
<th>½ cup sunflower seeds</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>½ cup dried cranberries</td>
<td>½ cup almonds</td>
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<tr>
<td>½ cup almonds</td>
<td>½ cup cranberries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>½ cup sunflower seeds</td>
<td>1 tsp cinnamon</td>
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**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.

*Try mixing and matching toppings to suit your taste and texture preferences. For example, add the nuts and seeds to the bag, remove from the microwave and add the seeds you prefer.*

*You can also substitute the dried cranberries for sunflower seeds, and almonds for sunflower seeds to make a gluten-free trail mix.*

*The alternatives are endless, so feel free to get creative!*

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*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, healthy 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*