

## THE STRESS-WEIGHT CONNECTION

When you're under pressure, your eating habits shift—and so do your hormones. What you eat affects your anxiety, too. Here, how to keep your body in balance.

BY MARNIE SCHWARTZ



Weight-management advice tends to focus on what you eat and how much you move. But while those two things are certainly important, so are your stress levels. Research finds that chronic stress is correlated with weight gain over time. In a study in the journal *Obesity*, people whose hair samples showed higher markers of the stress hormone cortisol were more likely to have a higher BMI. Another study found that women with stressful jobs (those that were demanding and gave workers little control over their tasks) were more likely to gain weight over 20 years.

## Why stress impacts the scale

Historically, stressful situations were physical and required a lot of energy (like when our ancestors had to run away from a predator), explains A. Janet Tomiyama, PhD, a professor of health psychology at UCLA. So the stress response floods your system with energy (i.e., glucose). But nowadays, when stressors are primarily psychological, that excess energy gets stored, mostly as belly fat. At the same time, chronically elevated stress hormones may increase your appetite. Your brain can also light up more from food when you're stressed. "If you do end up eating in response to stress, that food tastes better to you," says Tomiyama. And when we're feeling anxious, we tend to reach for comfort foods. That desire for dessert is in part biological: Even animals' stress is soothed by noshing on fat and sugar, Tomiyama adds.

## **STOPPING THE STRESS**

Modern life is full of stressors we can't necessarily control. But you can manage the stress in your life-and reduce its impact on your body, say the experts.

SLEEP! When you don't get enough shut-eye, your body hyperresponds to exter nal stressors. Sleep loss also slows your metabolism and increases your appetite. which exacerbates the effects of stress, says Tomiyama. Practicing healthy sleep basics, like sticking to a consistent bedtime and avoiding electronics before bed, can make a big difference.

Your diet can affect the way your body handles stress, says nutritional psychiatrist and Health Advisory Board member Drew Ramsey, MD, author of Eat to Beat Depression and Anxiety. "Well-nourished brains are less reactive, more calm, more optimistic, and think more clearly," he says. "In that mindset, we deal with stressors a lot better, too." Foods high in "brainessential nutrients" like vitamin E, zinc, and omega-3 fats may lower inflammation and reduce anxiety, he says. So can eating lots of plant-based foods: Studies link fruit and vegetable consumption to lower levels of stress, and getting plenty of fiber encourages a healthy gut microbiome, which may have the same beneficial effect. In a recent study in Scientific Reports, 64 women who took a prebiotic supplement (food for your gut bacteria) daily for four weeks showed reduced anxiety levels.

How food affects mood

## **CYCLE**

**EXERCISE (BUT NOT TOO** MUCH). Physical activity reduces stress and boosts your health. But when you're under pressure, excessive high-intensity exercise can be an additional stressor on your body, says nutritionist Carolyn Brown, MS, RD, cofounder of Indigo Wellness Group. So if you love HIIT,

work some lower-intensity activities such as walking or yoga into your routine.

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