

March is National Nutrition Month! How and what you eat, among other factors, determines how energetic you feel. Being dehydrated, going too long between meals or eating the wrong combination of foods may all drain your energy reserves. Here are some tips to ensure you're eating properly to maximize your energy levels.

Eating for energy: how to make the most of your meals

As the days grow shorter and the winter nights grow longer, it becomes harder and harder to stay energized. But by charging up with healthy fuel, you can help your body and mind keep pace and maintain peak performance. Below are a few suggestions on how to eat your way to extra energy.

Eat breakfast. Your mother was right—breakfast is the most important meal of the day. Studies show that people who skip a morning meal often have trouble concentrating, feel fatigued and irritable. Bypassing breakfast to save calories is also a bad idea since you're likely to overcompensate at lunch and dinner. Avoid foods high in sugar, such as toaster treats and store-bought muffins, which instantly raise your blood sugar, and then cause it to drop. Instead, stick to a balanced meal that contains complex carbohydrates (whole-grain toast, cereal, etc.), protein (e.g., an egg, a slice of cheese or lean meat) and a serving of fruit or vegetables.

Snack well, snack often. Eating five or six smaller meals throughout the day ensures your blood glucose levels remain steady. It also helps avoid that shaky or headachy feeling that occurs when you deprive your body of food for too long. Keep healthy snacks like nuts, seeds, fruit, yogurt and veggie sticks on hand at work and at home. Steer clear of “empty” foods such as pastries, candy, pop and other processed munchies that are normally high in calories and low in nutritional value.

Don't overindulge. Loading up at lunchtime—especially with carbohydrates—will leave you craving a siesta. Stick with lots of vegetables, lean protein (beans, chicken, fish, etc.) and ease off the bread. Moving your carbohydrate consumption to dinner will also help you sleep better.

Avoid caffeine. Coffee or tea may give you the jolt you need to get up in the morning, but rely on it too much and it can actually have the reverse effect. More than three cups a day can create a jittery, then lethargic cycle and may also interfere with your quality of sleep.

Drink up. Drink plenty of water throughout the day to help stay alert, as fatigue is a sign of mild dehydration. Eight glasses is standard, but if you had a tough workout or overdid it on the caffeine, try to drink more. Thirst is one of the final cues of dehydration, so it's important to drink plenty of water before you start feeling thirsty.

Eat a balanced diet. While in-vogue diets claim a “quick fix” to weight loss and energy gain, most nutritional experts agree that over the long run, a balanced diet—one that's big on whole grain, unprocessed foods and includes the four major food groups—is the best way to maintain energy levels and a healthy weight.

Pump up the iron. Sluggishness, especially in women, is often a sign of a low iron levels. Iron found in red meat is most easily absorbed by the body. Other options include: seafood (clams, in particular), spinach, fortified cereals, almonds, dried figs and legumes. These should be consumed with foods or drinks rich in vitamin C (e.g., orange or grapefruit juice) to maximize absorption of the iron. If you suspect your iron is low, or have noticed a drastic change in your energy level, consult your doctor.

As each day drags on, you may find it difficult to maintain the energy levels you once had. But with the suggestions outlined in this article, in combination with a regular diet and exercise schedule, you'll soon find that healthy energy levels aren't so far out of reach.

Fighting stress with food

Can certain foods help us better cope with stress? Yes...and no. In times of extreme stress, our bodies release hormones that activate our sympathetic nervous system that then stimulate the adrenal glands to release adrenaline and noradrenaline. Our hearts pound as oxygenated blood is redirected to the muscles, preparing our bodies to either fight or flee the threat. At such times, bodily functions not related to fighting or fleeing are temporarily put on hold – including the absorption of nutrients.

However, if our bodies are already well-nourished, we can better weather these intense periods of stress, as well as life's daily challenges; if we are lacking in certain nutrients we are less able to do so. For example, a lack of protein, iron, B vitamins, vitamin D and magnesium each contribute to increased fatigue, anxiety and moodiness. So instead of reaching for the potato chips, pudding or pie, incorporate the following foods into your diet:

1. **Spinach** contains magnesium, which helps improve your body's response to stress and may help reduce migraines or headaches.
2. **Oatmeal.** Carbs help you produce serotonin, a calming hormone that helps fight anxiety's negative effects – which is probably why many of us crave them when we are stressed. Indulge your craving but choose a healthier option, such as oatmeal. It is high in fiber, which means that your body will absorb it slowly, prolonging the serotonin boost and making sure your blood sugar is in check.
3. **Asparagus** is high in folate, which produces serotonin and helps stabilize mood.
4. **Turkey.** That sleepy feeling you get after eating Thanksgiving dinner is due to the amino acid tryptophan found in turkey. Tryptophan signals the brain to release the feel-good chemical serotonin, which promotes calmness and even fatigue.

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5. **Milk**, including **skim milk**, is high in antioxidants and vitamins B2 and B12. It also provides you with protein and calcium, which can reduce cramps, muscle spasms or tension and soothe premenstrual syndrome (PMS) for women.
6. **Nuts and seeds** cure many cravings because they are salty and crunchy. They also contain vitamin B12, magnesium, and zinc. Almonds also provide vitamin E, which, like vitamin C, fights stress-related free radicals that cause heart disease. Walnuts and pistachios are known to lower blood pressure. Sunflower seeds include folate, which helps produce dopamine, a pleasure-inducing brain chemical. Cashews are a good source of zinc – low levels of zinc have been linked to both anxiety and depression. Since our bodies have no way of storing zinc, it is important to get some every day. Toss a handful into your stir-fry!
7. **Berries**. Blueberries have some of the highest levels of an antioxidant known as anthocyanin, and they have been linked to all kinds of positive health outcomes, including sharper cognition. But all berries, including strawberries, raspberries and blackberries, are rich in vitamin C, which has been shown to be helpful in combating stress.
8. **Oranges** are rich in vitamin C, which is known to lower blood pressure and the stress hormone cortisol.
9. **Fish containing omega-3 fatty acids**, such as salmon, can help reverse stress symptoms by boosting serotonin levels. An omega-3- rich diet can also help suppress the production of the anxiety hormones cortisol and adrenaline.
10. **Avocados** contain lutein, beta-carotene, vitamin E, B-vitamins and more folate than any other fruit.
11. **Chocolate**. Yes, even chocolate can help relieve stress – but make it dark. High in flavonoids, which are lauded for their relaxing properties (chamomile tea is another great source), chocolate also contains phenethylamine, a chemical that enhances your mood. Try chocolate that is 70 percent cacao or higher.

The key to a nutritious diet – including the items above – is moderation and reasonable consumption. Remember, there is a threshold which can be crossed – when consuming too much of a good thing!

Only half the battle

While a healthy diet prepares your body for stressful situations, it is only half the battle. Together, as a combination with healthy eating, try to also:

- **Exercise**. Regular exercise is one of the best ways to manage stress. Even a brisk walk at lunchtime is a good start.

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- **Make sleep a priority.** Sleep provides essential rejuvenation time so no matter how busy you are, do not sacrifice a good night's rest.
- **Find ways to relax.** This can include deep breathing exercises, meditation, massage, yoga, tai chi or just quietly reading.
- **Do not self-medicate.** Do not try to cope with your fatigue, lack of energy, or anxiety with alcohol, sedatives, stimulants, nicotine or other substances. These will only worsen your stress in the long run.
- **Reduce your caffeine intake.** Studies have shown that caffeine can increase levels of stress hormones.
- **Have fun!** Laughter really is the best medicine and can help you find perspective.

Healthy eating support available to you

As a final note, your diet can strongly affect your mood, health and energy levels. However, maintaining a well-balanced diet can be a challenge with a hectic schedule and multiple personal and family demands. Through your Employee Assistance Program's nutrition support service, you can work with a Registered Dietitian who is focused on your health and goals. Connect with our Registered Dietitians for advice about:

- Weight loss/gain
- Lowering cholesterol levels
- Getting off the diet "roller coaster"
- Reducing high blood pressure
- Boosting energy
- Regulating diabetes
- Healthy eating on the go
- Preventing heart disease
- Accommodating shift work
- Preventing osteoporosis
- Eating a well-balanced vegetarian diet

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Healthy meal ideas for breakfast, lunch and dinner

In the midst of a full and busy life, it's easy to let taking care of oneself take a backseat. All too often a quick trip to the drive-through becomes habit and health and energy suffers. Think there's no time for a healthy meal? Let the ideas for quick, nutritious and portioned ideas prove that there is:

Ideas for a quick, healthy breakfast				
1 bowl cereal 1 cup milk 1 banana	2 slices whole wheat toast 1 cup yogurt 1 orange	2 pieces French toast 1 tbsp syrup 1 cup strawberries 1/2 cup yogurt	1 whole wheat bagel 1 tbsp peanut butter 1 kiwi 1 cup milk	1 whole wheat pita 1 slice low fat cheese 1/2 cup raspberries 1 cup milk
1 multi-grain bagel 2 tbsp low-fat cream cheese 1/2 cup yogurt 1 orange	1 poached egg 1 whole wheat English muffin tomato slices 1 slice cheese	2 high-fiber waffles 1/2 cup yogurt 1 cup canned peaches	3/4 cup granola 1 cup yogurt 1 cup strawberries & blueberries	1 multi-grain bagel with one egg cooked into center tomato slices 1 cup milk

Pair any of these ideas with a glass of water and enjoy a balanced lunch:

Ideas for a yummy, light lunch				
1 smoked turkey with fruit chutney on whole wheat bread. 1 apple	1 tuna sandwich on rye bread 1 handful of baby carrots 1/2 cup yogurt	Chickpeas & couscous salad wrapped in a flour tortilla. 1 nectarine	1 ham, sliced mushrooms, mustard mayonnaise in whole wheat pita bread. 1 can pineapple	1 slice Italian pizza with cheese & tomato sauce. 1 pear
1 chicken in pita bread with chili sauce 1/2 cup apple sauce	1 vegetarian hot dog in bun (with garnishes/condiments) Sauerkraut 2 dates	1/2 cup hummus, spinach, carrots and tomato slices wrapped in a flour tortilla 1 kiwi	1 egg salad on 7-grain bread 5 baby carrots 5 broccoli trees	1 Mexican burrito in flour tortilla 1 nectarine

While it can be easy to over-eat or get into other bad habits at dinner time, the following ideas can help you and your family get out of a fast-food or TV dinner rut, and enjoy the taste and the health benefits of a balanced, nutritious meal. If you'd like more information on how to prepare these meals, consult a basic cookbook or search for recipes online.

Ideas for a hearty, healthful dinner				
Macaroni & cheese with peas & carrots. 1 apple	2 cups lentil soup 1 slice crusty bread 1 salad with vinaigrette	1 tofu Loaf 3/4 cup corn 1 cup mixed red & green peppers	3 slices lean ham tossed with dark green lettuce, tomatoes, carrots, shallots & peas. Vinaigrette 1 crusty roll	1 baked salmon with fresh dill & lemon juice. 1 cup brown rice Mixed frozen vegetables
2 tacos made with veggie ground round. 1/2 cup grated cheese Tomato slices	1 cup chicken salad 1 whole wheat pita 1 cup steamed broccoli	1 baked chicken breast 1 baked potato 1 cup green beans	1 mushroom & cheese omelets 1 slice multi-grain bread 1 orange	3-4 oz. baked pork chop 1 cup pasta tossed with olive oil 1 cup steamed carrots

Use these ideas and get creative. Once you have a feel for portion sizes and healthful balance, have fun with your own creations. Make a little extra and share with a friend or freeze for later. Eating balanced meals is easier than you think!

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