

STRESS AND WEIGHT GAIN: CAN STRESS MAKE YOU OVERWEIGHT?

Most people would say that genetics, overeating, or not being active can lead to being overweight. Yet there may be another factor that can lead to being overweight that we tend to overlook: stress. According to the results of recent research published in the journal *Nutrition* (2007), chronic stress may be linked to weight gain, with a greater effect seen in men. Stress (mental or physical) can impact how and what we eat. It can also make our bodies prone to weight gain and ultimately obesity.

The connection between stress and weight gain is increasingly important to recognize and understand as obesity is on the rise in Canadian adults, increasing from 13.8% in 1978 to 23.1% in 2004. Overweight and obesity are linked to a higher risk for a range of chronic illnesses (e.g., type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and some types of cancer) and can also impact mental health. Obesity is frequently accompanied by depression, with obesity and depression often triggering and influencing each other as well.

Stress (mental or physical) can impact how and what we eat.



Stress is the body's way of reacting to a change that requires a physical, mental or emotional adjustment.

HOW CAN STRESS IMPACT YOUR WEIGHT?

Impact on the Body

Stress can impact weight by the physical reactions it causes in the body. One of these is an increase in cortisol, a hormone in the body that is involved in a number of bodily functions that impact weight. More specifically, research has shown that high levels of cortisol increase fat stores and cause excess circulating fat to be deposited deep in the abdomen. This excess abdominal fat can put you at increased risk for heart disease. An excessive production of cortisol can also slow your metabolism, causing weight gain. Cortisol is also thought to be linked to an increased appetite and cravings for sugar.

Emotional Eating

Stress can also affect what and how we eat. Eating in response to negative thoughts or feelings is often referred to as *emotional eating*. A common reaction to emotions like anxiety and anger is a loss of appetite, but emotional eaters tend to eat more when they are upset. Emotional eating occurs when a person eats a lot of food, usually "comfort" or junk foods, in response to their feelings instead of their hunger. Researchers estimate that 75% of overeating is caused by emotions.

DEALING WITH STRESS-RELATED EATING

Learn to recognize true hunger.

Emotional hunger comes on suddenly and can leave you feeling guilty. Physical hunger occurs gradually, satisfies you, and doesn't make you feel guilty.

Know your triggers.

Write down what, how much, and when you eat, as well as how you're feeling and how hungry you are. Over time, you may see patterns emerge that show negative eating habits and triggers to avoid.

Look elsewhere for comfort.

Instead of an unhealthy snack, take a walk, treat yourself to a movie, or call a friend. If stress is nudging you toward the fridge, try talking to someone about it to distract yourself.

Keep healthy foods around, especially healthy snacks.

Avoid having lots of high-calorie, low-nutritional, comfort foods in the house. If you feel the urge to eat between meals, choose a low-fat, low-calorie food, like fresh fruit or vegetables.

Eat a balanced diet.

If you're not getting enough calories to meet your energy needs, you may be more likely to give in to emotional eating. Try to eat at fairly regular times and don't skip breakfast. Include foods from the four food groups in your meals. Emphasize whole grains, vegetables, fruit, low-fat milk products, and lean meats. Choosing these healthier options will help you feel more satisfied for a longer period of time.

(Mayo Foundation, 2007)

What Can You Do?

Stress isn't going to go away, but you can learn to manage it better. Conquering the negative impact of stress on body weight requires a two-pronged approach:

1. dealing with the urge to overeat and;
2. managing overall stress.

It is important to recognize the differences between emotional hunger and physical hunger. It is also important to recognize the triggers or patterns that cause you to eat in response to stress.

Possible triggers include:

- Social triggers (eating to fit in)
- Emotional triggers (eating to "fill the void")
- Situational triggers (eating associated with certain activities)

A second strategy is to learn how to manage stress in more healthy ways. Regular exercise and proper sleep help us cope with life stress. There are many ways to manage stress without using food. Learn what helps you manage your stress.

Obesity can lead to many chronic diseases and other health issues. There are several steps that you can take to help reduce the impact of stress on your weight:



Take charge of the things that lead to emotional eating.

Become aware of what causes you stress.

Discover new and healthier ways to help reduce your stress levels.

Key References:

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