



Stress and poor eating habits: information on some of the possible effects of stress.

What is stress?

For more information about what stress is and some of the symptoms of stress, see our factsheet **Understanding stress** in the InfoCenter.

Why are eating habits important?

Our eating habits can be affected by stress and stress can be exacerbated by not eating properly.

When we are stressed, we often find it difficult to eat, or we find we crave chocolate or caffeine to keep us going. This can however mean that we don't get enough essential vitamins and minerals, leaving our bodies more susceptible to infection or just feeling generally run down.

Sometimes we feel we don't have enough time to eat three meals a day, or to stop and take a break. We might eat erratically, or too quickly. This can intensify feelings of tiredness or irritability, or just not being able to cope, as we put our bodies as well as our minds under stress.

The effects on the body of a poor diet or poor eating habits can lead to physical ill-health and can enhance existing feelings of stress, anxiety or depression. As such it is essential that we ensure that our diet is always balanced and our eating habits are regular. For more information on what constitutes a balanced diet, see our factsheet **What is a healthy diet?** in the InfoCenter.

What are good eating habits?

For most people regular eating habits means eating three meals a day - a decent breakfast to give you energy for the day, a medium sized lunch and a smallish evening meal - we don't use up many calories in the evenings usually, so it is best to consume less.

Eating smaller evening meals also allows our bodies to relax properly during sleep, as we don't need to use energy in digestive functions. Some people however find that 5 much smaller meals each day works better for them.

Whatever pattern you choose, you should try to eat the bulk of your food towards the start of the day and ensure that you keep to a regular pattern over time.

Good eating habits also include how we eat our food. It is important to take time over eating and not rush our food.

Finally, it is important that you consider where you eat your food.

Feeling tense or stressed will not aid your digestion, so you should find somewhere away from work if possible, where you can enjoy your food, rather than being distracted by other demands. Even half an hour to eat is better than eating over your schoolbooks!

Ensuring you take some time out from work will also help you to feel less stressed.

Should I seek help from a professional?

If you are finding that stress is beginning to take over your life, you could visit your physician and/or a complementary therapist on how to cope with symptoms and reduce levels of stress in your life. You may be referred by your physician to a counselor to help you work through some of your problems, or to a dietician if you are concerned about the balance or pattern of your diet.

You may also find it helpful to speak with your supervisor at work if your problems are work-related, as they have an interest in protecting you from any health or safety risks arising from work-related stress.

Where can I go for further support or information?

If you are an educator from one of the districts that have signed up to this service and you wish to speak to a qualified counselor, you can call the toll free Educator Support Line on 1-877-876-4327.