

Is Stress Making you Fat?

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Weight loss, weight gain – it's all about food and exercise, isn't it? Well no, it isn't as a matter of fact. There are several other issues that have to be addressed. One of them is stress.

The understanding of the relationship between stress and weight gain is relatively new. Ten years ago, no one spoke of it. Today, it is earning a frontline place in weight loss efforts.

Simply put, it works like this. Stress causes your body to increase production of a hormone called cortisol. Cortisol increases your appetite and "signals" your body to store fat and not to release it. This is particularly true of abdominal fat. Cortisol in some people can also cause them to binge eat when they are not really hungry.

Cortisol can exert good or bad effects in the body. Cortisol triggers the release of glucose and amino acids for cellular energy, and is closely associated with the "fight or flight" response. So a little is a good thing. However when we're under stress, when we're sleep-deprived, or when we're actually dieting and restricting our calories for weight loss, our body releases cortisol. And we get fatter.

From my work with clients it seems that our ability to offset this stress effect changes as we age. When we are young we can handle stress – or perhaps we don't translate events into stress in the same way – but after the age of 40 or 50 our reaction to stress is weight gain.

By bringing cortisol back into a normal range, you are able to alleviate that metabolic signal so your appetite is under better control, your blood sugar is under control, and your fat cells are in a state where they're more likely to release fat instead of store fat.

So controlling cortisol levels becomes essential if we want control of our weight. In today's post 9/11 world with our daily, often hourly doses of media-delivered bad news, stress is at an all-time high.

Suggestions to sleep longer, meditate or practise yoga, while valid are rarely embraced by the average person. (*Hey, I'm too stressed to meditate!*). Therefore we need to look elsewhere for help.

Fortunately along with the study of stress as a cause of illness - elevated cortisol has been associated with obesity, diabetes, osteoporosis, memory problems and suppressed immune function – scientists have also isolated a number of plant nutrients that can naturally lower cortisol levels. These include magnolia bark, epimedium and Beta-sitosterol.

Magnolia bark is a traditional Chinese medicine used for treating low energy as well as a variety of syndromes such as digestive disturbances caused by emotional distress and emotional turmoil.

Animal studies have shown that epimedium may function like an adaptogen (as does ginseng, for instance) by increasing levels of certain hormones when they are low (an energy-promoting effect), but reducing cortisol levels when they are elevated (an anti-stress effect). It has been used traditionally in China as an aphrodisiac to offset the effects of cortisol on the libido.

Beta-sitosterol has been shown to help maintain the normal ratio of catabolic stress hormones to anabolic hormones. This means we encourage our bodies to build muscle (anabolic) from protein we eat as opposed to encouraging our body to utilize muscle for energy (catabolic). This is especially important when dieting, since there is a greater risk that we will burn muscle for energy when calories are reduced.

The Keep Canada Slim program includes these nutritional supplements.