



Who couldn't use a little less stress, especially around the holiday season?

While you can't always control the sources of stress in your life, you can support your body in managing how it responds. One of the most powerful ways to do this is through what you eat.

Cortisol, often called the “stress hormone,” plays an important role in your body's natural response to stress. Released from the adrenal glands, cortisol helps regulate metabolism, control blood sugar, and manage inflammation. While occasional increases in cortisol are perfectly normal—like when you're facing a tight deadline or handling an unexpected home repair—chronically high levels can take a toll on your health. Over time, too much cortisol can lead to weight gain, high blood pressure, trouble sleeping, and even raise your risk for conditions like heart disease and diabetes.

The good news is that your diet and lifestyle choices can help keep cortisol levels in check, reducing stress and supporting your long-term health. Read on for simple tips and foods to help you feel your best and protect your health for the future.

A balanced diet with the right nutrients can help regulate cortisol levels and support stress management:

Magnesium-rich foods: Leafy greens like spinach, kale, and Swiss chard, as well as avocados, bananas, and dark chocolate, support your body's ability to relax by regulating cortisol production. Magnesium plays a critical role in the stress response, and low levels are often linked to higher cortisol.

Omega-3 fatty acids: Fatty fish like salmon, mackerel, and sardines, along with chia seeds, flaxseeds, and walnuts, help reduce inflammation caused by chronic stress. Omega-3s have been shown to blunt cortisol spikes during stressful situations.

Gut-friendly foods: Probiotic-rich options like yogurt, kefir, sauerkraut, kimchi, miso, and kombucha strengthen your gut-brain connection. A healthy gut supports cortisol regulation by influencing your nervous system.

Whole grains: Oats, quinoa, and brown rice are high in fiber and release energy slowly, preventing blood sugar spikes that can trigger cortisol surges. Stable blood sugar levels help keep cortisol in check throughout the day.

Berries: Blueberries, strawberries, and raspberries are packed with antioxidants that combat oxidative stress, which can lead to elevated cortisol levels over time.

Nuts and seeds: Almonds, walnuts, and flaxseeds are rich in healthy fats and nutrients like vitamin E, which can buffer the effects of stress on the body and help normalize cortisol levels.

Tea: Green and black teas contain L-theanine, an amino acid that promotes relaxation and reduces stress-related cortisol spikes.

Turmeric: This golden spice contains curcumin, a powerful compound that may help lower cortisol levels by reducing inflammation and oxidative stress.

Other ways to manage stress include:

Self-care: Prioritize activities that calm your mind and body, such as mindfulness, meditation, or taking a walk.

Sleep management: Restful sleep naturally regulates cortisol. Establishing a consistent sleep routine can help keep levels balanced.

Exercise: Regular movement helps lower stress levels, though high-intensity workouts should be balanced with recovery to avoid cortisol spikes.

Managing chronic diseases: Keeping existing health conditions under control with proper care reduces chronic stress and its impact on cortisol.

What to avoid:

Some foods and drinks can increase cortisol levels or exacerbate stress, including foods high in added sugar, which can cause blood sugar spikes and subsequent cortisol surges; saturated fats, which may promote inflammation and stress on the body; soda and alcohol, which can disrupt your sleep and stress response, and excessive caffeine, which may overstimulate your adrenal glands and raise cortisol.

By nourishing your body with these stress-busting foods and habits, you can better manage cortisol levels and protect your overall health.

Stress-Busting Grain Bowl with Turmeric Yogurt Dressing



Ingredients:

For the Bowl:

- 1 cup cooked quinoa or brown rice
- 1 cup leafy greens (spinach or kale), lightly steamed or sautéed
- 1/2 cup cooked mixed vegetables of your choice (e.g., roasted sweet potatoes, steamed broccoli, sautéed peppers, etc.)
- 1/4 cup fresh berries or 2 tbsp dried
- 6 walnut halves

For the Dressing:

- 1/2 cup plain unsweetened yogurt (Greek or nondairy)
- 1/2 tsp turmeric powder
- 1/4 tsp ground cumin
- 1 tsp honey or maple syrup (optional)
- Juice of 1/2 lemon
- Pinch of black pepper (to enhance turmeric absorption)
- 1-2 tbsp water (to thin the dressing, as needed)

Instructions:

In a large bowl, layer the cooked quinoa or brown rice as the base.

Top with steamed or sautéed leafy greens and remaining bowl ingredients.

In a small bowl, whisk together the yogurt, turmeric, cumin, honey (if using), lemon juice, black pepper, and water until smooth. Adjust the thickness with more water if needed.

Drizzle the dressing over the grain bowl and toss lightly to combine.