

Reduce stress on your gut



Stress is something we all deal with, but when we're chronically in a state of stress, our body — and especially our gut health — can feel the effects. The good news is that you can reduce the effects of stress on your gut.

HOW DOES STRESS AFFECT THE GUT?

First, let's break down how stress can affect your gastrointestinal system. According to research, stress can affect different areas of the digestive system in different ways:

- **OESOPHAGUS**

Stress may lead you to eat different foods, eat more or less than normal and may increase alcohol consumption and the use of nicotine.

Changes in dietary habits and lifestyle choices (like alcohol and cigarettes) may result in acid reflux or heartburn. Stress may make swallowing foods more difficult, too, and in rare cases, stress can cause spasms in the oesophagus which can be confused with symptoms of a heart attack.

- **STOMACH**

When it comes to the stomach, stress can make stomach pain, bloating and nausea more easily felt. Stress can also have an impact on hunger cues by decreasing or increasing appetite.

While you may have heard that stress can lead to stomach ulcers, stress itself does not increase stomach acid production. These ulcers are a result of a bacterial infection that is unrelated to stress levels. People with ulcers may be more susceptible to feeling increased pain when stressed, though.

- **BOWEL**

Stress can affect digestion and nutrient absorption. When stress is present, the transit time (the time it takes food to move through the digestive tract) can be altered. This means food can move slowly, causing bloating and cramping, or it can move through much faster, resulting in diarrhoea.

When it comes to absorbing the nutrients from your food, stress can affect the intestinal barrier (aka the gut lining).

Normally this barrier is strong, but in stressed conditions, the intestinal barrier can weaken, allowing

bacteria to slip through. Those with chronic bowel conditions like inflammatory bowel disease or irritable bowel syndrome need to be especially careful about stress levels.

HOW TO REDUCE THE EFFECTS OF STRESS ON YOUR GUT

A recent study interviewed 12,653 people with GERD (Gastroesophageal reflux disease) and found that almost half reported stress as the largest factor that worsened their symptoms, even when they were prescribed medication.

While doing things like avoiding certain foods, eating smaller and more frequent meals (instead of one big large one) and sitting or standing instead of lying down after eating can help with symptoms, finding ways to reduce stress before symptoms occur is important. Mindfulness meditation may be helpful to mitigate the effects of stress.

Here are five tips for reducing stress and anxiety to alleviate gut symptoms:

1. TAKE SHORT BREAKS TO BREATHE

Try aiming for at least one minute of slow and quiet deep breathing every couple of hours throughout the day.

2. SAY 'NO'

When your capacity for additional tasks or activities has been exhausted, don't take on any more obligations. Committing to more than you can handle is a sure-fire way to pile on the stress.

3. EXERCISE

Make time in your schedule to regularly work out or do yoga. As little as 15 minutes a day can be beneficial for stress reduction.

4. FOCUS ON YOUR LOCUS OF CONTROL

Worrying about things we can't control increases stress and anxiety. Instead, it's best to focus our energy on things we can control.

5. LISTEN TO GUIDED RELAXATION EXERCISES DAILY

Taking 2 to 10 minutes out of your day to meditate. This could help bring down your stress levels.