



nutrinews

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Food strategies for exam-time stress

Exam-time stress, and fewer hours of sleep that usually accompany it, affects your nutrient needs by reducing absorption, increasing excretion, and stepping up daily requirements for nutrients that affect your mental alertness and your immune system. Stress also increases the hormones that create cravings for carbohydrate-rich foods, especially sweets.

Eating habits are often at their nutritional worst during times of high stress. People eat too fast or sporadically, and they choose a food because it sounds good, it is handy, or they are hoping for a quick pick-me-up.

The two worst offenders are sugar and caffeine. At a time when you need your mental, physical, and emotional reserves, sugar and caffeine can leave you with plummeting blood sugar levels and jumbled brain chemistry, making matters worse.

The following tips may help you overcome nutritional pitfalls during exam time:

- **Have easy, convenient meal-type foods on hand**, such as frozen entrees, canned soups, stews, chili, and pre-made salads, to avoid living entirely on snack foods. Snacks don't energize you as much as a real meal that contains a combination of protein and carbs.
- **Avoid sweets and sugary foods.** If you crave sweets, eat a high protein nutrition

bar (one with over 10 g protein, read labels) instead of a candy bar.

- **Choose meals and snacks that emphasize protein over carbohydrate.** Higher protein meals will enhance mental activity and keep your energy level on an even keel better than carbs alone.
- **Stock up on healthier snacks:** nuts, cheese sticks, yogurt, cottage cheese, milk, crunchy fresh fruits and veggies (use dips), high fiber low sugar cereals, oatmeal, popcorn, herbal teas, and high-protein nutrition bars.
- **Avoid caffeine from beverages or pills.** The initial boost you get is followed by a rebound drop-off in energy later. Having one strategically-timed caffeine drink may

help more than lots of caffeine over many hours.

- **Avoid alcohol.**
- **Drink plenty of water and non-sugar beverages.** Thirst can be confused with hunger, and lack of mental concentration is one of the first signs of dehydration.
- **Use non-food stress busters:** stretch like a cat and take some deep breaths, go for a quick walk or run, take a mini-nap, play a game of solitaire, call a friend, or step outside and take in the scenery.

For more exam-time food choices, go to www.health.arizona.edu, click on "Health Promotion", go to "Nutrition", and under "General Nutrition" click on "Exam-Time Eating Strategies".

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