

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Tummy Troubles: Reducing Stress for Better Digestive Health

Whether you're anxious about a test, a job interview, nervous about a date or fretting over finances, digestive discomfort is an all too common experience. Human responses to fear, anxiety and stress, it turns out, are directly wired to the gut. Stress plays a key role in digestive conditions, including heartburn, ulcers, irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), acid reflux or even Crohn's disease. For relief of some of the most bothersome tummy troubles, consider:

Taking note. If you are suffering the effects of stress on your digestive system, it's worth taking the time to make a list of what you eat and when, along with a description of any pain or discomfort you feel and when it occurs. Do you cramp up every time you eat dairy or wheat? Perhaps you notice a change for the worse when you have soy products, meats, alcohol, sugar or acidic juices. Or maybe you suspect food additives or preservatives are the real culprits. This information can help you — with the help of a health care professional — determine what foods or food combinations may be the source of your tummy troubles.

Laughing out loud. Health benefits are no joke. A good sense of humor can't cure all that ails you, but laughter is known to stimulate organ function, soothe tension and ease stomach troubles. The physical action of a good belly laugh promotes digestion and stimulates circulation, which helps reduce stress. Over the long haul, laughter may help relieve pain and improve your immune system.

Taking a breather. Not only are people gulping down their food while on the move, but they're forgetting to breathe while they're at it. Deep breathing, even for a few minutes at a time, can help clear your mind and stimulate digestion. Several deep breathing exercises per day, especially before, during and after eating or drinking can increase your health, your self-confidence and bring about a more relaxed attitude all around.

Being open and honest. Most health concerns around digestion and stress have an underlying emotional aspect. What is it that you can't stomach? Is whatever you're holding on to really more important than your health? Learn to reframe problems as opportunities, and if needed get additional help.

Eating right. Some foods are more easily digested and comforting to your digestive system than others. Many people notice significant improvement by relying more on foods that are less taxing on the system, including cooked vegetables, soups, stews and ripe fruits. A whole foods diet that includes a daily dose of whole grains such as oat porridge, brown rice and legumes, may help put your digestive system back on track.

Supplementing your diet. Digestive enzymes and probiotic supplements — products that contain micro-organisms to support proper digestive function under stress — are helpful for many people with digestive issues. Probiotics, especially, have been found to help sufferers of irritable bowel syndrome (IBS). Both treatments are best used in combination with a simple diet: mostly whole foods, with little sugar, caffeine, alcohol or processed foods.

Getting support. When the stress is too much, look to family, friends and work colleagues for help. Many health issues run in the family and your parents or siblings may have had some success in countering the malady you're suffering with. If your workload is leaving you feeling overwhelmed, look

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for new ways to trim time-wasters from your routine and if you're attempting to "do it all," it may be time to ask a colleague for assistance. You might also want to access information resources to find out more about your condition and discover new ways to better manage stress.

It's essential to learn to cope with stress in order to improve your digestive symptoms and overall health. Proven, positive emotional factors like support, love, laughter and relaxation techniques can make a huge difference in your stress levels, and increase your digestive health. But if you need additional help to get on the right track, or are concerned your tummy troubles are a sign of something more serious, it's always wise to consult a health care professional.