

THE NUTRITIONAL MANAGEMENT OF STRESS & ANXIETY



Our distant ancestors were extremely active physically & they needed the boost provided by the release of adrenaline to facilitate the fight of flight' response in dangerous situations & to escape ferocious predators. However, stress today takes a very different form, for example stress is more likely to be the result of financial problems, family arguments, punishing work deadlines & the breakdown of relationships. We are rarely in mortal danger & yet the body's physiological response to stress, real or imagined, is the same now as it was for our ancestors who were fighting or fleeing from real physical danger. Chronic stress and its myriad negative effects on health account for many lost working days in the UK. It can also be a difficult health problem to resolve, especially if the symptoms are treated but the underlying factors & negative coping strategies that invariably develop are left addressed.

THE PHYSIOLOGICAL STRESS RESPONSE

◊The stress response is part of a larger physiological response which Hans Seyle called the **GENERAL ADAPTATION SYNDROME**.

◊Stress begins in the mind as a thought & it is this thought that initiates the physiological stress response that follows.

◊The first stage that occurs is the **ALARM PHASE OR FIGHT OR FLIGHT RESPONSE**. The pituitary gland secretes **ACTH** (Adrenocorticotrophic Hormone) which stimulates the adrenal glands to produce **ADRENALINE**. This causes the **HEART RATE & ITS CONTRACTILE FORCE** to increase so more blood is pumped through the body more quickly. The **RESPIRATORY RATE** also increases to better oxygenate the blood & remove waste products such as carbon dioxide. **BLOOD FLOW IS DIVERTED** to the heart, brain & muscles to facilitate increased strength & thought processes, and digestive processes slow down. The **PUPILS DILATE** to improve vision and **BLOOD SUGAR LEVELS RISE** dramatically as the liver rapidly converts glycogen stores to glucose to provide immediate energy for muscle, heart & brain cells.

◊The Alarm Phase cannot be sustained indefinitely & it is followed by the **RESISTANCE PHASE**. **CORTISOL** is released to convert protein to energy as glycogen reserves have been utilised, & **ALDOSTERONE** promotes the **RETENTION OF SODIUM** & the **EXCRETION OF POTASSIUM** to keep the blood pressure elevated. Continued stress & prolongation of the resistance phase dramatically increases the risk of diseases such as diabetes & hypertension.

◊Eventually hormones such as cortisol are depleted & the **EXHAUSTION PHASE** ensues. Loss of potassium ions, cortisol & DHEA result in poorly functioning cells, recurrent hypoglycaemia & eventually exhaustion.

The food we put into our body has a profound effect on our energy levels & our ability to adapt to & cope with stress on a mental, emotional, physical & biochemical level.

Food provides the body with the materials it needs to manufacture hormones such as cortisol, adrenaline & DHEA as well as neurotransmitters such as serotonin and immune cells. Poor food choices result in poor hormones, neurotransmitters and immune cells, stress levels rise and our ability to cope with stress diminishes.

People experiencing stress also tend to make poor food choices, possibly as a result of poor blood sugar regulation, adrenal malfunction or exhaustion, and an unconscious attempt to self-medicate:

For example refined carbohydrate foods & stimulants are often chosen since these raise blood sugar levels quickly, provide short-term energy boosts through stimulating adrenaline, & are a source of Tryptophan which helps to raise serotonin levels. However such foods also promote weight gain & poor blood sugar regulation through stimulating excessive insulin production. Poor blood sugar balance eventually leads to increases feelings of stress.

Signs of Stress & Associated Conditions

When stress becomes a problem signs & symptoms occur. Although these may vary between individuals, they commonly include **INSOMNIA, DEPRESSION, FATIGUE, HEADACHE, UPSET STOMACH, FREQUENT COLDS, FLU & INFECTIONS, DIGESTIVE DISTURBANCES, WEIGHT GAIN, IRRITABILITY, DEPENDENCE ON STIMULANTS & THE DEVELOPMENT OF NEGATIVE COPING STRATEGIES**.

Chronic stress can result in more serious conditions such as **ADULT ONSET TYPE 2 DIABETES, HYPERTENSION, CARDIOVASCULAR DISEASE, IBS, PEPTIC ULCERS, ASTHMA, PMS, ARTHRITIS, OBESITY, AUTO-IMMUNE DISEASES, DEPRESSION, & CANCER**.

It is therefore important to address stress & its causes as early as possible, & because our Diet provides the basic building blocks for all our body's defences against stress, Nutritional Therapy is an invaluable tool in stress management.

Some Nutritional Guidelines

- **Healthy Tryptophan**
Rich foods ie wholegrains
- **Increase intake of foods rich in B complex vitamins, zinc, chromium, magnesium & vitamin C** to support adrenal glands, liver & pancreas
- **Reduce stimulants, saturated fat and sugar**
- **Increase Essential Fatty Acids** from fish, nuts & seeds
- **Reduce refined carbohydrates & high GI foods**
- **Increase intake of complex carbohydrates & low GI foods**
- **Avoid stimulants** such as caffeine, tobacco, alcohol
- **Increase water intake**
- **Increase fruit, vegetables, wholegrains, beans lentils, brown rice, quinoa**



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