

# Lose Your Stress Fat

Blame your belly in part on stress. Then do something about it with this calming, slimming advice. BY JULIA TOLLIVER MARANAN

**S**TRESS MAY BE THE CAUSE OF that extra weight around your middle. Your body produces many hormones in response to stress. But one in particular, cortisol, will send you searching desperately for ice cream or other high-calorie foods to replenish the energy your body believes it spent handling the stressful event. This system worked well for our ancestors, who expended lots of energy evading physical threats and needed extra calories to replace those they spent. But modern stressors don't usually involve charging across a savanna, so we end up taking in more calories than we burn.

In addition, chronic stress tells your body to keep churning out cortisol, causing you to continually reach for sugar- and fat-laden foods. And cortisol signals your body to store fat—particularly at your middle—so you have a reserve for the next panic-worthy situation. This cortisol cue can make you pack on the pounds even if you have a stellar diet. These fat cells settle deep inside your abdomen, increasing your risk of heart disease, diabetes, and cancer. To determine if you eat in response to stress, take our quiz at right. The good news is that stress-induced pounds will melt away with a few tweaks to your diet, exercise, and stress-management tools.

## Fuel Your Body Right

Forget counting calories. In fact, research shows that women who think

about limiting what they will eat actually produce more cortisol than women who don't obsess about dieting. Don't make eating into a stressful experience—instead, focus on supplying

which again increases cortisol. Although no food will magically quell cortisol, experts say that unprocessed foods (like whole-grain bread and fresh vegetables) are the least likely to stimulate cortisol. Whole foods contain fiber and nutrients that help keep your blood sugar levels



When stress kicks in, try our plan instead of reaching for sweets.

### Consider This

#### Are You a Stress Eater?

If you answer yes to two or more of these questions, follow our plan to drop stress-induced pounds.

1. Do you regularly crave carbohydrates and/or sugary snacks?
2. Do you often eat to calm down when emotionally upset?
3. Do you feel guilty or have a negative view of yourself after eating?
4. Do you crave food late at night?
5. Do you sometimes feel that food is replacing something that's missing in your life?

your body with what it needs to perform well.

**Choose Whole Foods.** Eating refined carbohydrates sets off a chain reaction that leads to the release of more cortisol. It starts with the carbs rapidly elevating and then decreasing your blood sugar, wreaking havoc with your insulin levels as they try to restore balance, and triggering cravings. The guilt that may follow eating sweets adds mental stress to the equation,

steady; make them the mainstay of your diet.

**Emphasize Protein.** Very high-carb diets that don't include enough protein, fat, and fiber will make your body crank out even more cortisol. Eating protein slows down the absorption of carbohydrates, keeping sugar levels in check. Plus, evening out your blood sugar prevents that exhausting spike and crash that comes with eating sweets. If you exercise regularly you can safely consume up to 1 g of protein for every pound of body weight,

2 1/8" X 9 3/8"

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according to Shawn Talbott, Ph.D., a Salt Lake City-based nutrition expert and author of *The Cortisol Connection* (Hunter House, 2002). Include a serving of lean protein like chicken, fish, or soy with every meal and snack.

**Don't Shy Away from Fat.** Including a bit of fat in your meals and snacks will also help slow carbohydrate digestion, keeping your blood sugar steady and making you feel full. Choose unsaturated fats like those in olive oil, nuts, and avocados.

**"Yoga breathing techniques will help you tame tension outside the studio."**

**Plan Ahead.** Rushing between activities and delaying meals may leave you ravenous and reaching for processed, sugary foods as a quick fix, says Pamela Peeke, M.D., M.P.H., a nutrition expert in Bethesda, Md., and author of *Fight Fat After Forty* (Penguin, 2001). To combat this problem, carry healthy snacks to tide you over until you can eat a sensible meal. Peeke packs a homemade trail mix of almonds, walnuts, raisins, dried cranberries, and natural cinnamon granola.

### Exercise Smarter

Exercise is one of the most effective ways to manage stress. Here's what to do.

**Boost Your Mood.** Every time you move, your body secretes beta endorphins, brain chemicals that calm you down and regulate your stress hormones. Performing moderate activity like swimming, walking, or yoga for 30 minutes a day on most days of the week can reduce cortisol and improve your overall stress resilience. "Yoga is terrific," Talbott says. Not only do you get the physical benefits of a workout, but the breathing techniques you learn will help you tame tension outside the studio.

**Do Damage Control.** Even just 10 minutes of moderate exercise can make a world of difference in how you feel. The next time you want to pull your hair out, instead of reaching for a cookie, take a quick walk

## Success Story

### Beating Stress and Dropping Three Dress Sizes

**Naomi Henderson, 59  
Bethesda, Md.**

Ever since taking her first desk job at 30, Henderson had steadily gained weight. When she started a market research company, she worked 100-hour weeks and had no time to take care of herself. Up to a size 18, Henderson lacked energy and the extra weight worsened her arthritis. In 1995 she read an article about how executives managed stress and lost weight. She decided she too would tackle her stress.

She consulted Pamela Peeke, M.D., M.P.H., a nutrition expert in Bethesda, Md., who encouraged her to view exercise not as an extravagance but as a way to save her health and manage stress. At first, Henderson could walk only five minutes at a time. But she gradually built up her endurance and began treasuring her walks as an escape from her phone, fax machine, and nonstop emails. Three years after consulting Peeke, she fit back into a size 12/14 and started lifting weights and training for the New York Marathon, which she walked in 2001. These accomplishments gave her new confidence and respect for her body, and now she uses her daily walks to clear her mind and meditate on relationships, client work, and herself. She also takes bubble baths every day to unwind. "You have to put yourself at the top of your own to-do list," she says.

around the block. You may not solve all your problems during that time, but you'll feel better able to cope with them.

**Get Pumped.** Incorporate resistance training into your workouts for extra cortisol control. Plus, building muscle will rev your metabolism, which will help you slim down faster. For the best results, lift weights for 30 minutes at least twice a week, taking a day off in between to let your muscles recover.

## Use These Proven Stress Busters

Try these tips to lower your stress level and, in turn, curb cortisol.

**Sidestep Stress When You Can.** Stay serene by avoiding anxiety-inducing situations as much as possible. This is often easier said than done, but any step you can take will help. For example, if you know that traffic is a big stressor for you, take roads that don't have a lot of traffic or travel before or after rush hour.

**Supplement Wisely.** Anti-stress nutrients like magnesium and the B vitamins help you relax and boost your mood. Take 400 to 600 mg of magnesium and at least 100 percent of the B vitamins every day. If your multi doesn't provide that amount, add a magnesium supplement and a B-50 complex, recommends James LaValle, N.D., a naturopath in Cincinnati and author of *Cracking the Metabolic Code* (Basic Health Publications, 2002).

If you try magnesium and B for one week and they haven't noticeably lowered your stress level, consider adding the herb holy basil (*Ocimum tenuiflorum*), which reduces cortisol levels and helps your body adapt to stress. LaValle suggests taking 400 mg of holy basil two or three times daily. It's safe to take indefinitely, but do not use it if you are pregnant.

If you anticipate an anxiety-inducing situation, try the fast-acting supplement L-theanine, an amino acid from green tea (*Camellia sinensis*) that controls cortisol and helps you relax in 30 minutes or less without making you drowsy. Take 50 to 150 mg L-theanine to keep you calm, Talbott says. Check with your doctor before taking L-theanine if you use any prescription medicines or are pregnant. It is safe to take indefinitely.

**Create Pockets of Peace.** Throughout the day, take time to shut out the world and relax. Start by setting a timer for just 30 seconds; during that time close your eyes and try to clear your mind of all your worries and thoughts about your responsibilities. Wearing a pair of high-quality headphones will help block out noise. Try this on your lunch break and whenever you feel overwhelmed by stress. Once you're comfortable quieting your mind this way, add another 30 seconds so you're practicing for one minute. Keep increasing the time until you reach five to

10 minutes. Regularly performing this mental detox helps you stay calm and regroup when stressful events happen.

together. Whenever you can, use humor to diffuse stress (for example, email jokes to each other); laughter stimulates the

## A partner can help you calm down when you feel stressed and remind you to take breaks.

**Enlist a Stress-Taming Partner.** Recruit a significant other, friend, or co-worker to help you calm down when you feel stressed and to remind you to take breaks. Meet for a healthy meal or take a walk

release of beta endorphins, which further reduce your cortisol output. ●

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