

**When the going gets tough, the tough...start eating healthy food?**  
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***“If we're not willing to settle for junk living, we certainly shouldn't settle for junk food.”***  
– Sally Edwards

Joe was a great guy but life just wasn't going his way. His girlfriend had just broken up with him, he had not made the varsity football team and he had failed his first midterm. Every day he was eating food like chips, burgers, fries and his personal favorite - energy drinks because of all the stress.

Joanne, the ultimate procrastinator, had been up all night working on a paper. No dinner. No breakfast - only coffee to keep her awake. It was almost lunchtime and healthy food seemed to be the last thing on her mind.

Does this sound like you? If it does then you, like many students, have eating habits that are affected by stress. Some people are like Joe and eat fast food while others like Joanne stop eating all together. Trying to keep up with a busy student schedule doesn't seem to leave time to eat properly, but in order to keep the body and brain running efficiently it's at these stressful times that we need proper nutrition the most.

Skipping meals to save time can cause your blood sugar to drop and it may only partially recover to normal levels if the body doesn't get food soon. Since our bodies need food to function, you can see that it's not the course material that's making you fall asleep; it's the lack of proper nutrients!

Stimulants such as caffeine and sugars can make you feel good for a short while, but they are not enough to keep the body and the brain going. Grabbing a cup of coffee or some sugary candy should not be a substitute for actual food. While they may give you a short boost the energy drop that follows will leave you lethargic and less focused. On the other hand, consuming evenly spaced meals throughout the day that contain starches, protein, and carbohydrates maintains blood-glucose levels gradually, making you feel great all day long.

Poor eating habits may weaken your immune system, making you more susceptible to illness. Eating foods rich in certain nutrients such as vitamins B, C and antioxidants can increase immunity as well as add a little extra to your study efforts. There are certain chemicals in our brains and bodies like serotonin and dopamine that help to regulate the stress response. Serotonin regulates sleep, mood, appetite and some cognitive functions such as memory and learning, while dopamine can help us cope with stress as well as control mood and alertness. Serotonin is manufactured by an amino acid called tryptophan with the help of vitamin B6 and B12, while dopamine is manufactured from the amino acid tyrosine along with magnesium and B12. Therefore it is important to eat foods that contain these nutrients and especially during times of stress.

Some examples of where you can find these important nutrients are:

**Vitamin B6** (increases oxygenation, helps maintain health of the immune system, helps maintain normal blood sugar levels) → **fortified cereal, potatoes, bananas, meats and fish**

**Vitamin B12** (vegetarians at risk of deficiency can find this in fortified cereals) → **eggs, fish, dairy products and meats**

**Vitamin C** (required for growth and repair of tissues) → **strawberries, peppers and citrus fruit, broccoli**

**Magnesium** (helps maintain normal muscle and nerve function, supports a healthy immune system, keeps heart rhythms steady) → **nuts - cashews/almonds, spinach, soybeans, halibut**

### **Eat Well to De-Stress!**

#### **References:**

[www.eatrightontario.ca](http://www.eatrightontario.ca)

**Food & Mood: The Complete Guide to Eating Well and Feeling Your Best** Somer, E. (1995) New York: Henry Holt and Company

#### **Great ways to combat poor eating choices and stress are:**

- ✓ Cut up your fruits and vegetables ahead of time to eat as snacks
- ✓ Freeze pre-cut veggies to use for quick dinner ideas like stir-fry
- ✓ Snack on cheses and crackers between classes
- ✓ Eat nuts and trail mix instead of unhealthy snacks
- ✓ Prepare larger meals and freeze the leftovers into small portions to eat on hectic days
- ✓ If you don't feel like eating large meals, eat smaller ones more often throughout the day
- ✓ Avoid excessive caffeine and sugar intake in coffees, energy drinks and soda
- ✓ Be active because the release of endorphins makes us happy!
- ✓ Deal with stress by talking it out - instead of giving in to cravings