

Food For Stress

Today we live in a world where lots of people suffer from mental and emotional stress, and what Jamaicans call 'bad nerves'. But what really are bad nerves?

Our nervous system is composed of the brain and spinal cord connected to an amazing network of channels called nerves. Electrochemical signals travel along them to and from the brain, and communicate with every single part of the body. Nerves can be thought of as your body's electrical circuits. Stress and the unrelenting pace of modern living exert an ongoing strain on our nervous system.

Research shows that some foods help to heal weak nerves, sometimes better than medical drugs. Indeed, food can be medicine, even for our nerves, minds and emotions. Why choose a drug first when there are simple nutrients available that may do the job? This is particularly important when one considers the potentially dangerous side effects of many drugs used to treat mental disorders. These can range from an increased risk of suicides to severe hormonal imbalance to abnormal, violent and aggressive behaviour. However, if you have been diagnosed of or being treated for a mental disorder, it is important that you consult your health-care provide regarding the information shared below.

HEALTHY FATS

More than 60 per cent of the human brain is made of fats. Much of the fats in your brain are similar to the omega-3 fats found in fish oils. These fats are particularly evident in the walls of the nerve cells and the insulation around the nerve fibres. Your grandmother was right - fish is brain food.



Some major medical centres worldwide are now using high doses of omega-3 fats to treat depression and other mental illnesses. Even if you are taking antidepressant medication, fish oils make these drugs more effective and can sometimes replace them. I have written exhaustively about the many other health benefits of fish oils, and in my opinion, everyone can benefit from omega-3 supplementation.



Coconut oil is another very special oil that can benefit the nervous system. Studies have reported its usefulness in improving memory and concentration and in actually treating Alzheimer's disease.



THE B VITAMINS

An optimal intake of the B vitamins can have a direct effect on important chemicals in the brain, like serotonin, norepinephrine and dopamine. Research also suggests that B vitamins help neutralise toxic that are linked to anxiety and depressive disorders.



B vitamins play a crucial role in how well you respond to stress. They play a key role in energy production by your cells and your body's demand for energy is increased during times of stress. B vitamins (except vitamin B12) are not stored in the body for long, so they should be taken every day, ideally with each meal.



Foods that supply B vitamins include whole grains such as brown rice, yeast extract, lentils and other pulses; green vegetables, eggs, nuts, seeds, dairy produce, seafood, liver, and lean meat. You can also supplement with a high-quality B complex vitamin or a well-formulated multivitamin.



VITAMIN C

A United States study has found that high doses of vitamin C reduced the levels of stress hormones in the blood. Many experts recommend that anyone undergoing prolonged stress needs this nutrient in much greater quantities than what is normally sufficient. Vitamin C also helps to maintain the important immune system that is so vulnerable to stress.

Foods rich in vitamin C include guava; citrus fruits like oranges, lemons, limes, and grapefruit; and berry fruits like blueberries, strawberries, cherries, and cranberries. Cantaloupe, melon and kiwi fruit, and vegetables like broccoli, cabbage, peppers and tomatoes are also good sources. Like the B-complex vitamins, vitamin C is not stored in the body.



Molasses, walnuts and several other foods contain a chemical called uridine that has a crucial influence on the nervous system where it stimulates nerve cell growth and improves the energy uptake by the brain.

It is interesting that molasses is a great source of uridine because molasses is produced as a waste product from the sugar industry.



When sugar cane juice is refined to white sugar, as much as 98 per cent of the nutrients are removed. White sugar is a potentially toxic food while the waste product, molasses, contains most of the nutrients in sugar cane, including vitamins, minerals and uridine. Research shows that molasses can help prevent depression. Eating molasses is great for relieving stress, enhancing relaxation and improving the quality of sleep.

MAGNESIUM

A shortage of magnesium activates the stress response, and during stress this mineral is lost from the body in larger amounts. The stress response involves the movement of calcium into cells and changes the internal magnesium-to-calcium ratio. Normal cells contain 10,000 times more magnesium than calcium. When this ratio changes, the cells go into a



hyperactive state. This can cause tension, irritability and painful muscle cramping - common symptoms of magnesium deficiency. The muscles and nerves need magnesium in order to relax, so this mineral is very important in stress management and relief. Magnesium is found in wholegrain cereals, nuts, pulses, seeds and green vegetables. You can also take magnesium supplements or soak in Epsom salt baths.



Calcium, like magnesium, is needed in greater amounts during times of stress and is necessary for the health of the nerves and muscles. Choose health sources of calcium such as soy milk and products, natural yogurt, pulses, green leafy vegetables and fish.

Low levels of zinc are common among those suffering from stress. It is essential for boosting the immune system and fighting infections. It is found in oysters, red meat, nuts, sunflower seeds, egg yolks, dairy produce and wheat germ.

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*Pictures added.