



### Nutrition Q & A Ask Joey!

#### Digestion 101: Part 2 Stress and the Nervous System

Q: I have found when I am stressed I lose my appetite, while my girlfriend has a lot of GI issues and discomfort under stress. How does stress affect digestion? — RT

A: It's a Friday and you're working late... there is no energy left for cooking, so you pull into a drive-thru for a quick meal. Moments later you ease onto the freeway, but red taillights are all you can see. In frustration, you pull out your takeout meal and eat it in your car. Stressors are all around, and your digestion is challenged. There are many things going on physiologically that will not allow that meal to adequately nourish you, and it's not just the fact you chose fast food. It's the stress!

Stress can be both physical and emotional

No matter the trigger, stress has profound effects on your nervous system, specifically the parasympathetic and the sympathetic. Here's an introduction to basic neurophysiology: The sympathetic nervous system controls the innate response of fight-or-flight; the parasympathetic nervous system is responsible for rest-and-digest. As important as both systems are, they do not run at the same level at the same time. For instance, fight or flight is an evolutionary response which enables vertebrate animals to react quickly to a perceived attack. Historically this perceived danger would have been something along the lines of an animal attack, but in modern society, it can be traffic, deadlines, work, school, kids, etc. So

many of us are in a relatively constant state of flight or flight. Stressors trigger the sympathetic nervous system to raise the heart rate and increase blood flow to muscles in preparation for attack. This action conversely dulls the parasympathetic nervous system to constrict blood flow to the gut, limiting proper digestion. That may explain physiologically why you lose your appetite when you're stressed.

Identify and address your personal stressors

Others, when under stress, may turn to food for comfort, and a cascade of discomforts can result. Undigested food that enters the gut is digested by bacterial fermentation. Bacterial fermentation happens when beneficial and pathogenic bacteria, which call our GI tract home, metabolize undigested food for energy. While bacterial fermentation is doing our bodies a great service, it is not free. As those single-celled organisms metabolize our meal they create CO<sub>2</sub> in the process, which causes general discomfort: gas, cramping and bloating.

So, in order to get the most out of your meals and improve your digestion in a stressful world, identify and address your personal triggers, practice stress management techniques, and try to always eat in a relaxed environment.

Tips for improving digestion in a stressful environment

- Set the table in a pleasant manner: Create ambience with candles, cloth napkins and your favorite dishes.
- Sit down to eat.
- Take a few deep breaths and center yourself before you begin to eat.
- Take a moment to appreciate where your food came from and the hands that grew and prepared it.
- Do not multitask at meals times: turn off any external distractions such as your phone, TV or computer.
- Savor each bite: Take your time to enjoy your meal and put your fork down between bites.
- Be aware of your senses: Eating is more than just tasting your food.
- Drinking ice cold water with meals can weaken your digestive fire and cause GI distress.

