

Do you need a study to tell you that stress levels in this country are at an all-time high? Not really. Just turn on the television or flip open your laptop and watch as news of economic woes, citizen protests, and general global upheaval inch your shoulders up past your ears. Still, here's a little proof: A recent survey by the American Psychological Association reports that we're more tense than ever. Worse yet, it's taking a toll on our health and well-being. Stress doesn't merely turn moods a little sour. It spikes cortisol levels. It accelerates aging. It can lead to weight gain, especially around the middle. It puts a strain on relationships and makes life generally more difficult. In other words, figuring out how to relax amid the mayhem does a body good. Here, strategies to reduce stress without exacerbating the problem.

TAKE A CHILL PILL

If you don't quite belong to the Klonopin class of stresser-outers and would rather try something subtle, there are a few good options. A combination of calcium and magnesium has been shown to have a relaxing effect on muscles and nerves. "A nice balance is two parts calcium to one part magnesium," says nutritionist Shawn Talbott, author of several books on reducing stress, including *The Cortisol Connection: Why Stress Makes You Fat and Ruins Your Health—and What You Can Do About It*. Try Weil Balanced Cal-Mag (\$18.99). "Take one dose in the morning and the other before bed." Talbott also recommends 100 milligrams daily of L-theanine, the calming amino acid found in green tea. "Another good one is magnolia bark, 400 to 500 milligrams a day," he says. "It slants more toward antianxiety. It's like nature's Klonopin." And Malaysian ginseng, of which he recommends 50 to 200 milligrams, "brings cortisol down. Fatigue just sort of melts away."

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Eat more, not less. "One of the biggest stressors is not eating," Talbott says. "People who skip breakfast, skip lunch, who are dieting to lose weight, are always having this overactive stress response. When you have a lot of stress, it causes every tissue in your body to break down faster. But there is one tissue that



STRESS LESS

Feeling anxiety about how stressed you are? RELAX. There are easy ways to find some peace. By Sari Botton

responds oppositely: belly fat."

Balance carbs with protein and fat. "The other really bad thing that increases your overall stress exposure is a high intake of simple carbohydrates," Talbott says. "It makes your body more likely to be producing the stress hormone cortisol, which tells it you're hungry for more sugar." He advises patients, "Every time you have a carb, have a protein with it. Carry a Ziploc bag of peanuts and cashews so if you're stuck with only a carb, you can balance it."

Drink your milk, or eat yogurt or cheese. "Dairy is a great way to reduce your stress response," Talbott says. "Partly it's the calcium and magnesium, but there's also a little peptide chain that has a calming effect."

Other important antistress foods include fatty fish and/or omega-3 supplements. "There is some benefit to 2,000 milligrams a day," Talbott says. He also suggests eating brightly colored fruits and vegetables. "The brighter, the higher the content of flavonoids, which are very protective against stress hormones," he explains.

INHALE, EXHALE

"Most of us breathe very shallowly when we're feeling stressed out," says Susan Lord, an integrative physician who lectures about stress at the Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health in Massachusetts. "This raises the stress hormones." The antidote? "Simply becoming aware of breathing and

doing diaphragmatic breathing from the belly will reset your stress hormones and bring you back to normal. Just three minutes can reset your entire biochemistry."

UP YOUR "MEDS"

As in meditation. At least that's the way Priscilla Warner, author of *Learning to Breathe: My Yearlong Quest to Bring Calm to My Life*, now refers to sitting and calming her mind. She recommends guided imagery CDs by Belleruth Naparstek, who works with troops in Afghanistan and Iraq. "She would guide me to a place I couldn't get to on my own." Make some time for some yoga too, suggests Warner. "A monk I studied with who suffered from terrible anxiety all his life said, 'Your body is the horse, and your mind is the rider. The horse needs yoga, exercise, good food. The rider, it needs meditation.'" ■