The Low Stress Diet

Keeping The Immune System Strong In The Face Of Stress
This WELCOA feature article brings you the insights of National Stress Expert, Dr. Brian Luke Seaward. In 2010, Dr. Seaward addressed WELCOA members with a three-part training series on stress management. The information shared in this publication is based on Dr. Seaward’s WELCOA webinar presentations.

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tress and stress management should undoubtedly be a top priority for your health promotion programs. After all, excessive stress can increase the risk of high blood pressure, heart disease and obesity over time. But stress-related diseases also affect the gastrointestinal (GI) tract—more so than any other physiological system in the body—and can bring about illnesses and conditions such as ulcers, acid reflex, colitis, irritable bowel syndrome and Chron’s disease.

In your efforts to help employees address and cope with stress, it is imperative not to overlook the important link between stress and nutrition. Stress affects all aspects of human nutrition. If your employees are stressed, their bodies are not going to digest food or absorb nutrients properly, and their metabolisms will suffer. Additionally, certain foods and eating habits can actually trigger the body’s stress response, resulting in serious health consequences.

The good news is that the reverse holds true—by choosing certain foods, changing their eating habits and making more conscientious nutritional decisions—your employees can reduce their stress and even reverse the harmful effects it has on the body.

There is no other organization fully dedicated to worksite wellness. WELCOA is a leader in providing valuable, trustworthy resources. This niche is WELCOA’s alone.”
Once a single aspect of the immune system is affected, it’s not long before other negative reactions can occur. The remainder of this article will offer more detail on just how stress affects human nutrition, and vice versa, and look at the harmful effects of stress on the immune system. We will also provide you ways to help employees prevent and overcome the negative effects of stress with some easy-to-implement strategies for your workplace.

**Stress, Diet & the Immune System: The Domino Effect**

When your employees are stressed, their immune systems suffer. And once a single aspect of the immune system is affected, it’s not long before a whole chain reaction of negative responses can occur. In other words, it’s a domino effect. The next section takes a look at how and why these “dominoes” fall, and offers tips you can use to teach your employees about managing their stress triggers.

**The body’s nutrients are depleted.** When your employees are stressed, they should know that important nutrients will be used up much faster as the body kicks into its “fight or flight” response. In the stress-response process, the body utilizes more nutrients than it might normally use during a resting state, including vital minerals like magnesium, calcium, potassium, zinc and copper. These minerals are utilized by the body in about 15 different metabolic processes. If these critical nutrients are depleted, employees’ metabolisms suffer because they do not have the “fuel” they need to function properly.
Unhealthy “quick fixes.” When people are stressed, good eating habits tend to go out the window. Stressed individuals will gravitate toward comfort foods, junk foods and highly processed foods. Moreover, when people are stressed, it’s hard to find time to prepare foods or cook, so it’s easy to turn to frozen dinners, fast food or take out. Your employees ultimately need to know that most prepackaged and fast foods are prepared at the lowest cost possible, and with little to no regard for health and nutrition quality. These foods are usually stacked with processed sugar, salt, fats and various other substances that tend to please your taste buds, but wreak havoc on the rest of your body.

Poor food choices trigger the stress response. Much like putting gasoline on a fire when you’re trying to put the fire out, many foods that employees will turn to when stressed tend to promote the stress response even further. Foods that induce the body’s stress response include anything with refined sugar, processed flour or white flour, salt and caffeine. Foods containing these substances trigger the release of epinephrine and norepinephrine into the bloodstream, which increase heart rate, blood pressure and metabolic activity. When individuals are already stressed, this food-induced trigger only adds to the problem.

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The immune system becomes compromised. Specific foods can also compromise your employees’ immune systems. For example, certain types of fat, such as saturated fat, cannot be taken in through the bloodstream easily. As a result, people who eat diets heavy in saturated fats put undue stress on their bodies because their digestive systems have to work harder to break down these foods and then get them transported throughout the rest of the body. In addition, foods with refined sugar can compromise the immune system, because they decrease the number of white blood cells, thus affecting the functionality of the immune system. So in essence, the more sugar your employees consume, the more they suppress their immune systems. It’s as simple as that.

Nutrition Tips That Promote A Healthy Immune System

Although we certainly can’t eliminate stress from employees’ lives, we can offer them information, tips and strategies to effectively cope with it and keep their health intact. The following nutrition guidelines are intended to help your employees adopt practical eating behaviors that will enhance their immune systems when the body is under stress.

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When implementing these guidelines, keep in mind that there is not a one-size-fits-all diet, simply because everyone’s physiology is different. The low stress diet detailed below does not focus on losing weight—although that may certainly happen. These strategies are designed to help employees keep their immune systems functioning when they’re dealing with stress at optimum levels.

The Low-Stress Diet:

1. **Eat a variety of food colors.** Within the past 10 years, researchers discovered compounds called bioflavonoids, which are plant substances that give fruits and vegetables their color and contain antioxidant properties. More recently, researchers discovered that bioflavonoids can help fight cancer or the growth of cancer cells.

It’s important to note to your employees that they can only benefit from these properties when they eat fresh fruits and vegetables with naturally occurring bioflavonoids. Processed potato chips or diet sodas, while they do have color, do not contain the same, nutritionally beneficial compounds. Encourage your employees to maximize the bioflavonoids they are taking in by eating a variety of vibrant colors. Red peppers, green apples, blueberries and green, leafy vegetables are some examples for a healthy range.

2. **Choose foods that are high in antioxidants.** Help your employees get familiar with the concept of free radicals. Free radicals are oxygen molecules, and when they enter the body, they work hard to destroy healthy cells, cell membranes, mitochondria, and RNA and DNA. This is clearly a bad thing, but the good news is that the dangerous effects of free radicals can be counteracted by consuming foods rich in antioxidants. Antioxidants can essentially destroy free radicals, and can be found in a variety of fruits and vegetables.
Choose organic foods whenever possible. You may see your employees roll their eyes and hear complaints that organic foods are expensive. And there is certainly truth to that—organic foods are more expensive than conventionally grown foods, because they have been grown or raised on soil that has been clean of residue from herbicides, fungicides, pesticides and fertilizers for at least three years. Organic foods don’t have those potentially harmful substances—that’s what the certified organic label means.

Employees should be encouraged to choose organic foods whenever possible. Of course, they may ask, “Can’t we just wash our fruits and vegetables? Won’t that get rid of those substances?” Although some chemicals can be removed by washing food, it is important to note that most harmful substances are actually in the soil and get taken up through the root system, which means they’re not only on the foods; they’re in the foods as well.

If possible, try to offer organic fruits and vegetables at company meetings, in the cafeteria and elsewhere throughout your organization. Make sure employees know the foods are organic, and why you have gone the extra step to provide them with a more pure, nutritious food.
Drink filtered water. Water is the ideal drink of choice at the worksite, but bottled water isn’t always best. There’s no regulation of bottled water, and a lot of it, these days, is just tap water. Furthermore, research shows that across the country, our water systems retain much of the runoff from herbicides, fungicides, pesticides and fertilizers, and although there are filtration systems throughout our country’s water treatment plants, it appears that they’re not doing the job properly. Traces of everything from steroids to birth control pills to antibiotics are showing up in drinking water. So, if you can install a water filtration system at your workplace and encourage your employees to do the same in their homes, you can help ensure the water they’re drinking is healthy and pure.

Reduce caffeine consumption. Caffeine tends to trigger the stress response. If employees are stressed, excessive caffeine consumption can only make this worse. While you don’t have to suggest that your employees completely avoid caffeine, you should try to make them aware of how much they consume. For some people, drinking 14 to 15 cups of coffee a day is just the norm, but they need to realize the harmful effects that that amount could have when stress compounds on top of it. Also, remind your employees that caffeine is not just in coffee, but it’s also found in sodas and chocolate.

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Avoid or minimize genetically modified foods. When a gene from a flounder fish is spliced into a tomato so that the tomato can withstand frost, you now have a genetically modified organism (GMO). Genetically modified foods contain a variety of compounds and chemicals that aren't naturally in their DNA. Employees should know that corn, soy and tomatoes are the most heavily genetically modified foods.

We’re beginning to see fairly significant problems associated with genetically modified foods and the chemicals used to grow them. A large increase in food allergies has emerged as one of the biggest problems. The increase in food allergies directly corresponds with the introduction of GMOs into our national food chain. There used to be only three significant food allergies—eggs, milk and peanuts. Now, however, many people have serious allergies to over 40 or 50 substances, and this is thought to be the result of GMOs. Moreover, most food allergies are due to an overactive immune system. The bottom line is to avoid these foods as much as possible by eating organic—a label that protects your food from genetic modifications and harmful chemicals.
7. **Incorporate fresh herbs and spices into meals.** Fresh herbs and spices not only make foods tastier, but they also have anti-microbial properties. An anti-microbial is a substance that kills or inhibits the growth of micro-organisms, such as bacteria and fungi.

Another tip your employees should know: the reason a fresh herb or a spice is healthy is due to its essential oils. Yet, many people store their herbs and spices, dried, on a rack right above the stove, which ultimately evaporates out all the essential oils. So, the fresher the herbs and spices your employees are eating, the better.

8. **Consume free range meats.** “Free range” means that the animals are not factory animals, and are free of chemicals that are typically found in conventionally produced meats, including synthetic hormones, antibiotics, pesticides, herbicides, fungicides and synthetic fertilizers. These potentially dangerous compounds are created in the laboratory, but eventually get into the food chain when the animals ingest them, and then people ingest them through their meat. This is a very problematic cycle. The best thing your employees can do is to make sure that the foods they eat are as clear of these substances as possible—which is why eating free range meats is best.

9. **Consume an adequate amount of fiber.** The key word here is adequate. The World Health Organization recommends that individuals consume between 30 to 40 grams of fiber per day. However, the typical American tends to eat less than eight grams of fiber a day. Why is fiber so important? In very blunt terms, fiber acts like a broom that cleans out the GI tract. So, if your employees are not taking in fiber, they’re not sweeping out that GI tract. This is problematic, especially since colon cancer is on the rise. Research suggests that this is largely due to inadequate amounts of fiber in the diet.

Employees need to know that the best sources of fiber include fruits and vegetables, and that little to no fiber is available through a diet high in processed and prepackaged foods.
Include omega-3 oils in a proper diet. It’s very important that your employees know the sources of omega-3 oils in the foods that they eat. Certain eggs, fish and flaxseed are all great sources of omega-3s. The human body cannot naturally make omega-3 and omega-6 oils—these substances are only available from external sources—and the average American diet tends to be extremely heavy in omega-6 oils, and lacking in omega-3 oils. Inflammation is a major symptom in people who don’t get an adequate amount of omega-3s, and this can have negative effects on the entire body.

Preparing fruits and vegetables. Fruits and vegetables are a great source of nutrition, but your employees should know how to prepare them, so they can benefit from all of the vital nutrients. This especially applies when cooking vegetables in water. When vegetables are dropped into hot or boiling water, the water leaches out most water-soluble vitamins and minerals, meaning most of the good nutrients go down the sink, instead of on the plate. Your employees should steam their vegetables to avoid this problem, and maximize the nutrition benefits from their food.

Additionally, cooking with Teflon-coated cookware is problematic because research is showing that people who cook with Teflon consume some of the plastic and the petro chemicals that rub off from nonstick surfaces. You can help your employees be more conscious of how they prepare their foods, so they can gain the food’s full benefits and be safe from harmful byproducts.
Choose supplements wisely. In most cases, the best source of vitamins comes from their natural source, which mainly includes fruits and vegetables and other natural, whole foods. Supplements shouldn’t be completely ruled out, but employees do need to be aware of the nutrients their body really needs, and the best ways in which they can attain those nutrients.

When it comes to vitamins and supplements, the real question is: what are you eating? What are you lacking? It’s important to teach your employees about the body’s natural shedding process—that if you can’t use, or already have enough of a certain vitamin or mineral—it will just be eliminated through the digestive process. Encourage careful selection of supplements and make sure your employees know to buy only the vitamins they actually need, instead of throwing money down the toilet.

Coping with Stress One Bite at a Time
We’ve given you 12 practical eating and nutrition tips that can help your employees combat the harmful effects of stress. While not impossible, it may be somewhat unreasonable to assume that employees will immediately adopt all 12, so, we’ll leave you with one last piece of advice:

Simply encourage your employees to eat at least one meal a day that is nutritionally designed for their immune system. Just one meal! If they can incorporate any of the tips above into that one meal, they will be doing pretty well, because by and large, most people today are not eating any meals for their immune system. Get them started with one, and soon, hopefully they will gravitate towards much healthier eating-habits and lifestyle changes, and maybe take your advice to heart for all of their meals.