

# Nuts

Cracking the code on nuts

By Kirsty Baxter

Stress has almost become a by-product of 21st century living, so commonplace that it is now something we believe is almost inevitable to experience. But the knock-on effect stress is having on a wide spectrum of health issues is staggering, and not to be underestimated.

Diet, lifestyle, and a focus on key nutrients all play a role in helping to manage stress effectively. But what should this look like in terms of a suggested dietary change?

I recommend: Repleting nutrients which are depleted by stress and needed for a healthy stress response is key, as this dynamic can create vicious cycles of unresolvable stress. For example, stress hormones will increase excretion of magnesium, where we need magnesium to promote calming GABA activity in the brain to counteract this stress. Therefore, increasing whole foods rich in magnesium is always a good approach.

Reducing caffeine intake is also key, as it excites nerve cells in the brain, which can activate the sympathetic nervous system. The effects of caffeine will be exaggerated for those with higher cortisol, and avoiding excessive intake is key to wind back chronic



stress responses. Eating regular and nutritionally balanced meals is also vital due to the link between blood sugar levels, insulin, and the cortisol response.

Because of the growing body of evidence that links gut microbiome dysbiosis to impaired cognitive performance and mental health, supporting a diverse and rich community of gut bacteria is

also key. This can be done by eating a diet high in fibre and antioxidant polyphenols such as lots of whole grains and a rainbow of vegetables. The gut microbiota also interfaces with nerve cells in the gut, which can stimulate the vagus nerve, and produce metabolites such as butyrate, which are known to cross the blood-brain barrier, reduce neuroinflammation and improve brain



function.” The brain needs omega 3 fatty acids for the formation of healthy nerve cells. It has also been reported that omega 3 fatty acids are associated with a lower risk of depression.

Today I want to talk about other good source of oils - nuts. It's fair to say that nuts have earned their place as a key food within healthy eating patterns. Over the past few decades, evidence has demonstrated that healthy unsaturated fatty acids, plus the fibre and phytosterols in nuts, contribute to this effect. Additionally, nut consumption can play a key role in achieving optimal health. But the road to acceptance hasn't always been smooth for these nutritional powerhouses!

**Nuts and the weight myth**

In the 1980s, low-fat diets were recommended for weight loss and reducing cardiovascular disease (CVD) risk. This led to avoidance of many high-fat foods (such as nuts, seeds, avocados and vegetable oils). We now better understand that there are different types of fat, and not all fat is unhealthy. When it comes to nuts, the pervasive myth that nut consumption negatively affects people's weight persists today, despite substantial evidence showing this not to be true. An analysis of 68

studies exploring the effect of eating nuts on body weight concluded that no increase in body weight, BMI, or waist circumference among nut consumers.

The healthy unsaturated fats, fibre and plant protein content of nuts, in addition to the satiety hormones released after consumption, help satisfy hunger and reduce appetite, so you feel fuller for longer. What's more, research shows we don't absorb up to 30% of the energy in many nuts! Replacing less healthy foods, high in saturated fat such as biscuits, cakes, and chocolates, with nuts is an effective strategy to optimise one's health status. As an ideal snack, swapped out for that cookie or muesli bar or chocolate, one can eat 8-10 tree nuts once a day. So, let's get crunching!

