

Wellness

Wednesday



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7 Habits That Are Secretly Messing With Your Cortisol

Cortisol, often referred to as the "stress hormone," plays a crucial role in our body's day-to-day functioning. This essential hormone is involved in regulating our immune system, sleep-wake cycle, blood sugar levels, and response to stressful situations. However, when cortisol levels become imbalanced, it can lead to a host of health issues, from high blood pressure and irregular heart rhythms to increased risk of anxiety, depression, and insomnia.



While we may be aware of the impact of major stressors on our cortisol levels, many of us are unknowingly engaging in everyday habits that are secretly disrupting this delicate hormonal balance. In this Wellness Wednesday, we'll uncover the seven surprising habits that could be sabotaging your cortisol levels and explore practical strategies to restore harmony within your body.

Consistent Sleep Deprivation

One of the primary culprits behind elevated cortisol levels is chronic sleep deprivation. When you regularly fail to get the recommended 7-9 hours of sleep per night, your body is forced to function in a perpetual state of stress. This constant state of alertness causes your cortisol levels to remain high, even when your body should be resting and recovering.

To maintain healthy cortisol levels, it's crucial to prioritize consistent, quality sleep. Establish a regular sleep schedule, aiming to go to bed and wake up at the same time each day, even on weekends. Implement a calming bedtime routine, such as engaging in relaxation techniques or limiting exposure to blue light-emitting devices before bed.

Inconsistent Wake-Up Times

Closely related to the importance of consistent sleep is the need for a predictable wake-up routine. Your body's natural cortisol rhythm is designed to peak in the morning, providing the energy and alertness you need to start your day. However, when you wake up at different times each day, you disrupt this natural cortisol cycle, leaving you feeling sluggish and fatigued.

To support your body's cortisol awakening response, aim to wake up at the same time every morning, even on weekends. Expose yourself to bright light, whether it's natural sunlight or a specialized light therapy device, within the first hour of waking. This exposure helps signal to your brain that it's time to start the day, triggering the release of cortisol and suppressing melatonin, the sleep-inducing hormone.

Consuming Excessive Stimulants

While a cup of coffee or tea in the morning can provide a helpful boost, consuming excessive amounts of caffeine throughout the day can have a detrimental impact on your cortisol levels. Caffeine is a stimulant that triggers the release of cortisol, and when consumed in excess, it can keep your stress hormone levels elevated for an extended period.

To maintain a healthy cortisol balance, be mindful of your caffeine intake and try to limit it to the morning hours. If you find yourself relying on caffeine to get through the day, it may be a sign that your cortisol rhythm is out of sync, and you could benefit from addressing the underlying causes.

Indulging in Alcohol Overindulgence

Another habit that can disrupt your cortisol levels is excessive alcohol consumption. While alcohol may initially have a sedative effect, it ultimately increases cortisol production, leading to a state of heightened stress within the body.

The recommended guidelines for alcohol intake are no more than one drink per day for women and no more than two drinks per day for men. However, it's important to note that these guidelines may vary depending on individual factors, such as metabolism and sensitivity to alcohol. If you find that even moderate amounts of alcohol have a significant impact on your cortisol levels, it's best to reduce or eliminate your consumption.

Exposure to Stressful Media and Triggers

In today's digital age, it's easy to become inundated with negative news, disturbing social media content, and other stress-inducing stimuli. Consuming this type of media, especially in the hours leading up to bedtime, can significantly elevate your cortisol levels, disrupting your sleep and overall well-being.

To mitigate the impact of stressful media and triggers, be mindful of your consumption habits. Set boundaries, such as limiting your exposure to troubling news or avoiding social media scrolling in the evenings. Instead, engage in relaxing activities that help lower your cortisol levels, such as reading a book, practicing mindfulness or meditation, or spending time in nature.

Lack of Morning Sunlight Exposure

Sunlight exposure plays a crucial role in regulating your body's natural cortisol rhythm. The morning light signals to your brain that it's time to start the day, triggering the release of cortisol and suppressing melatonin. Without this morning light exposure, your cortisol awakening response may be disrupted, leading to grogginess and difficulty getting started in the day.

Make it a point to get at least 5-10 minutes of direct sunlight within an hour of waking up, if possible. This could involve taking a brief morning walk, enjoying your breakfast outdoors, or simply opening the curtains to let the natural light in. On cloudy days, even indirect sunlight can provide the necessary cues for your body to maintain a healthy cortisol cycle.

Ineffective Stress Management Strategies

While the previous habits can contribute to elevated cortisol levels, the way you respond to stress can also play a significant role. If you don't have effective strategies in place to manage stress, your cortisol levels may remain high for extended periods, leading to a host of negative health consequences.

Develop a toolbox of stress-reducing techniques that work best for you, such as deep breathing exercises, mindfulness practices, regular physical activity, or engaging in enjoyable hobbies. The key is to find ways to quickly lower your cortisol levels after a stressful event, rather than allowing the stress to linger.

Remember, the goal is not to eliminate cortisol entirely, as it is a necessary and natural response in the body. Instead, aim to understand your cortisol patterns and implement strategies to limit unnecessary spikes and facilitate a quicker return to a balanced state.

STRAWBERRY ETON MESS



INGREDIENTS

32 ounces strawberries, hulled (2 pints) divided
1/2 tablespoon sugar
2 tablespoons water
1/2 cup heavy whipping cream, chilled
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
1/2 cup non-fat Greek yogurt
3 1/2 ounces vanilla meringue cookies

Easier Eton Mess: If you want to make it faster, use frozen whipped cream for more of a 3-ingredient Eton mess.

Dairy-Free Eton Mess: Omit the yogurt and heavy whipping cream and swap it for Cocowhip, which is available in the freezer section.

Strawberry Eton Mess is a beloved British dessert that has captured the hearts and taste buds of dessert enthusiasts worldwide. This delightful treat, believed to have originated in the late 19th century at Eton College in England, combines the irresistible flavors of fresh strawberries, whipped cream, and crunchy meringue cookies into a harmonious symphony of textures and sweetness.

THE ORIGINS OF ETON MESS

The origins of Eton Mess can be traced back to the prestigious Eton College in England, where it is said to have been a popular dessert among the students and faculty. The exact origins of the dish are somewhat unclear, but it is believed to have been a simple, yet delicious, way to utilize the fresh strawberries and meringue cookies that were readily available on the college grounds.

THE KEY INGREDIENTS OF STRAWBERRY ETON MESS

At the heart of Strawberry Eton Mess are three essential components: fresh strawberries, whipped cream, and meringue cookies. Each ingredient plays a vital role in creating the unique texture and flavor profile that makes this dessert so irresistible.

Nutrition Information Serving: 1/2 cup, Calories: 109 kcal, Carbohydrates: 19 g, Protein: 2.5 g, Fat: 3 g, Saturated Fat: 1.5 g, Cholesterol: 9 mg, Sodium: 16.5 mg, Fiber: 2.5 g, Sugar: 16 g



INSTRUCTIONS



HOW TO MAKE IT

1. Slice 4 ounces of the strawberries and set aside for the end.
2. Quarter the remaining strawberries and place HALF of them in a medium bowl. Use a fork or potato masher to roughly smash them until you have a chunky puree. Set aside.
3. Add the remaining quartered strawberries to a small saucepan, combine with sugar and water. Bring to a boil then reduce the heat to medium low and simmer, stirring occasionally, until reduced and thickened and the fruit has softened, 7 to 9 minutes.
4. Transfer to a bowl to cool completely. When cool, mix the reserved chunky puree together.
5. Right before serving, make the whipped cream: In a medium bowl, combine the chilled whipping cream and vanilla. Using a hand mixer, whisk at medium speed until the cream reaches stiff peaks, 2 to 3 minutes. Add the yogurt and whisk at medium speed again until the mixture returns to stiff peaks, about 30 seconds.
6. Crush the cookies so there is a variety of sizes but most pieces are small. Gently fold in the most of the crushed cookies, reserving a few tablespoons for garnish.
7. In 8 small glass serving bowls or cups, layer the strawberry puree and cream mixture, followed by more of the strawberries.
8. Topping: Top the mixture with the sliced strawberries and sprinkle the reserved meringue cookies on top.

You can also make this in one large bowl or trifle dish layering the strawberries and cream. Then use a large spoon or spatula to make only one or two folds through the mixture so the fruit and cream are swirled, but just barely (they'll keep mixing together as you serve).

If making in one large bowl: There's about 2 generous cups of the cream/meringue mixture and 2 1/2 cups of the fruit, for about 4 1/2 cups total, plus a generous garnish of sliced strawberries and some crumbled cookies. If you have a trifle bowl I suggest doubling the recipe to serve 12-16. Serve by spooning into individual glasses or small bowls.

<https://www.self.com/gallery/bodyweight-exercises-you-can-do-at-home>

Featured Exercise ► Lateral Plank Walks



HOW TO DO IT:

- Start in a high plank with your shoulders above your wrists and abs tight.
- Step your right foot and right hand to the right, immediately following with your left foot and left hand. Take a few "steps" in one direction, then walk in the opposite direction.

THE BENEFITS:

Core Muscles: The plank position engages your abdominal muscles, including the rectus abdominis, obliques, and transverse abdominis, helping to strengthen and tone your midsection.

Upper Body Muscles: As you move laterally, you'll activate your shoulder muscles, including the deltoids and triceps, as well as your arm muscles, promoting overall upper body strength and definition.

Balance and Stability: The Lateral Plank Walk challenges your proprioception and balance, requiring you to engage your stabilizing muscles to maintain proper form throughout the movement.



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Regular exercise can help you control your weight, reduce your risk of heart disease, and strengthen your bones and muscles. But if it's been awhile since you've exercised and you have health issues or concerns, it's a good idea to talk to your doctor before starting a new exercise routine.



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DAILY REMINDER

Open minds lead to open doors.

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