



## DEPARTMENT OF **PUBLIC HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES**

### April 2026 Nutrition Article **Stress Awareness Month**

April is recognized as Stress Awareness Month, a time dedicated to increasing public awareness of stress, its causes, and effective coping strategies. Stress awareness is crucial for older adults because it helps them manage the unique stressors they face, such as health concerns, financial worries, loss and grief, social isolation, and limited activity, among others. By understanding and addressing stress, older adults can maintain their mental and physical well-being, which are essential for a healthy and independent lifestyle.

The purpose and significance of Stress Awareness Month aim to highlight that stress is not just a temporary inconvenience but a serious health concern that affects everything. Chronic stress can contribute to anxiety, sleep disturbances, heart disease, weakened immunity, and other health issues.

#### **How Stress Affects Older Adults**

Stress in older adults can significantly impact their nutritional intake and overall health. Chronic stress affects the body in many ways. The physiological effects of unmanaged stress can impact various systems that include muscle tension and pain in the musculoskeletal system; an increase in blood pressure, adding the risk of heart disease and stroke in the cardiovascular system; a triggered fight-or-flight response, affecting hormone levels in the endocrine system, including hunger levels; disrupted digestion in the gastrointestinal system, leading to digestive issues like irritable bowel syndrome; and anxiety and depression in the nervous system.

Overall, unmanaged stress can have significant negative health effects on your mood, your immune system function, and well-being.

#### **The Inflammatory Response**

Stress triggers inflammation in the body through complex biological systems – but just know that the body responds both physically and mentally by releasing cortisol (an anti-stress hormone) and activating the immune system. This is a normal response when the stress is temporary, but according to recent research, the prevalence of stress in older adults is significant: Over 19% of the elderly population experiences depression, over 16% has chronic anxiety, and almost 14% indicate stress is a significant part of their everyday life.

Stress becomes dangerous when the body's natural response systems stay activated for too long. During stress, the body releases cortisol, which is meant to support us in short-term emergencies. When cortisol remains elevated for long periods, it can interfere with immune function, allowing inflammation to persist.

Other stress-related responses – including the release of pro-inflammatory cytokines – can also contribute to broader systemic inflammation that affects various organ systems. This persistent inflammation is the foundation of ALL chronic diseases.

It's important for everyone, especially for older adults, to continue to create an anti-inflammatory environment through diet and stress management.

#### **Eating and Wellness Strategies**

As we know, nourishment provides the ultimate health foundation as you get older. Stress in older adults can lead to malnutrition due to impaired digestive function, thereby affecting the body's ability to metabolize nutrients. In addition, chronic stress can lead to poor eating choices – choosing foods that not only fail to nourish but also contribute to inflammation due to synthetic ingredients the body cannot manage.

Eating well is crucial for managing stress effectively. Nourishing foods – wholesome fruits and veggies, quality whole grains in their basic form, and quality proteins prepared from fresh, whole ingredients – help support the immune system.

Healthy eating also helps reduce cortisol levels, which can become dangerous when activated for too long. Ignoring random hunger and fullness signals and eating high-quality foods every few hours during the day will help stabilize blood sugar and support the immune system in fighting inflammation caused by stress.

But quality eating isn't the only intention needed to combat stress – learning effective strategies and tools is also important. One of the best strategies is to understand your stress patterns and recognize whether something is within your control or outside of it. The reason this strategy is so important is that it helps you recognize when you can problem solve and when you may need to use specific stress-management techniques – such as deep breathing, mindfulness, or counseling – to keep stress from becoming chronic.

*Jaime J. Larese, MS, RDN, NBC-HWC is a registered dietitian nutritionist and nationally board-certified health and wellness coach working in Montana. If you're interested in scheduling a nutrition consult with Jaime, visit: [bit.ly/4d21owg](https://bit.ly/4d21owg). If you're on Instagram or Facebook follow her @jlnutritioncoaching + @thefoodstoat*

---

## Recipe of the Month

### Easy Homemade Mac and Cheese

#### INGREDIENTS:

- 2 cups of whole milk
- 1 tsp of salt
- 2 cups of water
- 16 oz of whole wheat macaroni
- 2 cups of sharp cheddar cheese, shredded
- 1 cup of peas, cooked

#### INSTRUCTIONS:

1. In a deep skillet or Dutch oven, combine milk, salt, and water over medium-high heat.
2. Stir in macaroni and bring to a boil.
3. Reduce heat to a simmer and cook, stirring frequently, for about 8 minutes until pasta is tender and most liquid is absorbed.
4. Turn off heat and stir in cheese and peas.
5. Serve immediately.

