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Farming, Ranching, and Stress: It's a Family Issue

#10: Taking Care of Your Nutritional and Physical Needs

Joan Hegerfeld, Extension food safety specialist

When asked what they value most, many people will say their health. However, when faced with a stressful situation that will not go away, the same people forget all about their health and start worrying.

Farm and ranch families struggle with extreme stress from uncontrollable forces such as weather, low market prices, or farm machinery breaking down. For many farmers, ranchers, and farm workers, decision making and adjusting to the extraordinary stress consumes their whole thinking, their whole days, their sleepless nights. Their livelihood is dependent upon forces over which they have no control. Eating right and getting adequate amounts of sleep and physical activity are often compromised when faced with crisis situations.

Eating right is very important to maintaining your health in the good times and even more important when you are under added stress. Eating a balanced diet on a regular schedule can lessen the stress on the body.

People often respond differently to stress in relation to their eating habits. They can fall into one of three traps: no appetite, eating sporadically, or relying on comfort foods. **No appetite** for food leads to a lack of essential nutrients, a low energy level, and unhealthy weight loss. For several

different reasons, stress being one of them, the appetite control center of the brain does not send hungry signals when you should be hungry.

If experiencing a very low or no appetite consider some of the suggestions from the American Dietetic Association:

- Add pizzazz—color and texture—to your meals.
- Try not to eat alone.
- Go for aroma. Fill the house with enticing food aromas such as cinnamon, fresh baked bread, cakes, etc.
- Keep mealtime pleasant—try to stay away from unsettling topics of conversation.
- Keep easy-to-prepare foods on hand. There are times you may not have energy to prepare a meal.
- Eat by the clock – particularly if you are not getting any hunger cues.

*You can't
control the
weather ...
but you can
control how
you take care
of yourself.*

Eating sporadically can contribute to overeating and feelings of highs and lows. Eating sporadically is often referred to as “binge eating.” This can lead to the eating disorder bulimia where an individual overeats and then purges or intentionally vomits. Research has shown a tendency for eating disorders such as bulimia or anorexia to get their start when a person starts a weight-loss diet during an extremely stressful or traumatic time in life.

Comfort foods, the foods that give us personal pleasure such as chocolates or potato chips, are often high in fats but are OK in moderation. If they are consumed throughout the day or in excessive amounts, you do not have a well-balanced diet, and this will more than likely lead to unwanted weight gain.

Additional stress may bring with it a chaotic schedule, making it that much more difficult to keep a handle on what, when, and how much you are eating. To keep your nutritional status in check, make a conscious effort to not fall into one of the traps described above. You may not have control over the stressor. However, you do have control over how you take care of yourself.

Keeping yourself in check also means addressing chronic ailments such as indigestion, diarrhea, weight gain/loss, tiredness, or other ailments by visiting your health care provider. Don't try to save the price of a doctor's visit and rely on over-the-counter medications to treat an illness that persists.

Using dietary supplements to counteract stress doesn't alleviate the stress. **There are no stress vitamins.**

So-called "stress vitamins," which claim to help you deal with emotional stress, serve no purpose, according to the University of California, Berkeley. Although your body may need additional nutrients during periods of physical stress (i.e., after surgery), there's no evidence that these special formulas (usually vitamins C, E, and B-complex) will help you if you're facing psychological stress.

If you are concerned about the nutritional value of what you are eating and you feel a dietary supplement would be beneficial, talk to your physician or a registered dietitian.

There are also non-vitamin supplements that claim to improve your emotional well-being. Research addressing many of these supplements does not back up the manufacturers' claims. **Consult with your physician if you are experiencing feelings of depression.** This is an illness that cannot be treated over the counter.

Maintaining health under normal conditions is benefited by **regular physical activity**. It's even more important if you are under stress, but try to keep physical activity level in perspective. If you are scooping snow, piling sand bags, or fighting fires, you are probably getting more physical activity than you are used to. In these instances be sure to pace yourself and drink plenty of water. Some stretching exercises before going to bed will help with stiff muscles and relax the tension you may be experiencing. If suffering from chronic neck or back pain, this is not a time to skip prescribed exercises.

But if you sit on a tractor seat all day or are confined to the house, be creative and build some time to get 20 to 30 minutes of enjoyable physical activity in your day—it may be dancing around your living room!

You can also reduce the stress of stretching your food dollar, especially during the summer if you have school-aged children home during the day. Suddenly you have more people with very healthy appetites to feed. If stretching the food dollar during trying times causes additional stress, contact one of the following for assistance: your county Extension office, social services, clergy, local food bank, and other organizations that work to help meet community needs.

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