Stress Can Make the Pounds Accumulate

**By NICHOLAS BAKALAR**MARCH 1, 2017

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There is some evidence that stress prompts people to turn to sweet, high-calorie “comfort foods.” Now scientists have confirmed a link between long-term stress and obesity.

The [study, published in Obesity](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/oby.21733/full), tested 2,527 men and women over 50 years old, quantifying stress by measuring levels of cortisol, the stress hormone, in 2-centimeter hair clippings, or about two months’ growth.

After controlling for age, sex, ethnicity, smoking, diabetes and other factors that might be linked to obesity, they found that the higher the level of cortisol, the greater the body weight, B.M.I. and waist circumference. Higher cortisol levels were also associated with persistence of obesity over time.

Other studies have relied on measures of cortisol in blood, urine or saliva, which can vary by time of day and be affected by temporary stressors and other factors. But this study was able to measure general stress levels over two months to get a picture of the long-term effect.

The researchers acknowledge that they were unable to determine whether chronically high cortisol levels are a cause or a consequence of obesity (feeling “fat,” for example, could raise your stress levels).

The lead author, Sarah E. Jackson, an epidemiologist at University College London, said that while it may not be possible to eliminate stress, “you may be able to find ways to control it. Even just being aware that stress might make you eat more may help.”

A version of this article appears in print on March 7, 2017, on Page D6 of the New York edition with the headline: Weight: Stress Is Linked to Obesity. [Order Reprints](http://www.nytreprints.com/)| [Today's Paper](http://www.nytimes.com/pages/todayspaper/index.html)|[Subscribe](http://www.nytimes.com/subscriptions/Multiproduct/lp839RF.html?campaignId=48JQY)