

Solving our food cravings

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Edible Insights
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Why do we crave certain foods? Why are we slaves to ice cream, chocolate, and cheese? Is it simply habit or is there something physiological going on?

Cravings are more complicated than you might think, and not always driven by a lack of willpower. Understanding the different types of cravings will help guide you toward better self control. Here are a few suggestions to help ward off some of those food obsessions:

Hunger cues: The role of leptin

Body fat releases many signals via hormones. One of those hormones, called leptin, resides in the stomach and releases signals about hunger and metabolism. It communicates with the brain to either curb appetite or increase appetite. As an example, if we start dieting and don't consume enough calories, our bodies believe that we are starving and, as a result, leptin levels begin to fall, which in turn stimulates feelings of hunger. It's important for the body to "hear" the leptin signal correctly, and allow leptin levels to rise to reduce hunger, then fall naturally to signal satiety. Accomplishing this requires sticking to a healthy diet for the long haul. When this happens, leptin signals will accurately alert the brain that we have eaten enough, stored away sufficient fat, and the hunger cues disappear.

Overweight people are at a disadvantage during dieting because they are more leptin resistant. Their bodies are less sensitive to identifying the signal correctly, experiencing false hunger signals. A person who is very overweight or who has more body fat must stay on a weight loss program longer before leptin is finally sensitized and true weight loss is experienced.

Sweet cravings mid-afternoon

If you crave sweets mid afternoon or evening, you may be deficient in serotonin, a neurotransmitter that makes us feel happy. Serotonin levels are primarily affected by three things: exercise, sunlight and refined carbohydrates. Ice cream and hot chocolate may be favorites at night because they contain tryptophan, the precursor to serotonin. Unfortunately, they are also loaded with sugar, which not only gives a short-term, artificial boost of serotonin — happiness — but is also highly addictive and ultimately ends up as extra weight. The better, natural way to get more serotonin into your diet is to add high quality protein meats plus exercise and plenty of sunshine, especially during the darker winter months. Replacing some of those carbohydrates with protein will stem the sweet cravings (for more information on serotonin, see my article entitled: "Take Control of Your Moods, Naturally," May 2006 at <http://www.gazette.net>). Other helpful supplements include chromium and glutamine, both of which are effective in balancing blood sugar.

Cravings all day long

A craving for sweets that lasts all day may indicate an overgrowth of yeast in the digestive tract. Yeast or fungal overgrowth can spread throughout the body as a consequence of taking too many antibiotics, steroids or birth control pills and eating a high-sugar, refined carbohydrate diet. Yeast is a fungus that thrives on sugar. Usually we can keep it under control by maintaining an adequate supply of beneficial bacteria in the stomach and intestines. But when there is an overabundance of sugar in the diet the yeast takes over and causes distressing symptoms like cravings, rashes, bloating, itching and bowel problems, as well as low energy. You can reduce yeast by eliminating sweets as well as adding in beneficial bacteria, or probiotics to your diet, which can be found in yogurts like Dannon Activa. While this may not solve the problem entirely, it's a good first step toward eliminating those overwhelming urges to continually load up on carbs.

Food addiction

Chocolate, cheese, wheat and sugar are all addictive foods. Believe it or not, these foods target the same area of the brain as heroin or morphine. Cheese even contains minute traces of morphine and codeine, so it's no wonder that people

crave these foods. While food addictions are tough to beat, the first step toward managing them is recognizing which foods are addictive to you. Then, in order to control cravings, the addictive food must be removed entirely from the diet. Since the body has developed a food dependency, symptoms of withdrawal including headaches, extreme fatigue and irritability will occur. In my practice, I start most clients on a dairy, wheat and sugar-free diet, and they all experience withdrawal symptoms. But after three to four days, the negative effects dissipate and their energy is higher, their quality of sleep improves and they lose weight. And all they did was eliminate some trigger foods from their diet.

Retraining your emotional triggers

When a craving hits, most of us try to resist the temptation for as long as possible. We may set a timer for 15 minutes and then, once the bell rings, decide whether or not the craving is still worth it (usually it is). During those 15 minutes we will distract ourselves with other activities to “get through it.” Dr. Elizabeth Carr, a clinical psychologist in Gaithersburg recommends “sitting” with that craving for a period of time and reflecting about why it’s happening.

“Cravings are a way to dull the sensation and distract the eater from addressing difficult emotions. Once you learn to stop and reflect and sit with that uncomfortable feeling for a while, you realize that you can tolerate it.” Carr explains. She insists we are strong enough to tolerate those emotions, but sometimes as adults we resort back to youth-like habits of distracting ourselves versus confronting uncomfortable situations. Instead of “distracting yourself” for 15 minutes, Dr. Carr recommends reflecting on what potentially uncomfortable feeling may be surfacing. If you still give into the craving at the end of the timed session, forgive yourself and move on. If you do make it through the test, try stretching the time out a bit longer next time. Teach yourself in the delay period to understand your emotions a little bit better.

Cravings don’t have to rule anyone’s life. They are merely impulses, and by understanding what type they are we can make changes to our diet and lifestyle to help eliminate them. Don’t give your power away to food. Understand your own cravings so you can get back some control.

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