

Managing Food Cravings

What is a Food Craving?

A **CRAVING** is an intense or urgent desire for a type of food or flavor. This feeling may seem uncontrollable or cause you guilt as a result of perceived bad eating habits, but this is not necessarily the case. It is important to be mindful of what influences cravings and how to manage them.

Food Craving Triggers

MOOD: Emotions and daily stress can easily trigger food cravings. Food can be used as emotional comfort in times of sadness, stress, or as a reward. This can lead to mindless snacking and is particularly difficult to stop when the food is sugary or has pleasing sensory aspects.

ENVIRONMENT & SENSES: Tempting food items that are excessively sweet, salty, or fatty that are conveniently kept in the house, car, or at work can lead to cravings and formation of poor eating habits. Seeing, and especially smelling, favorite foods or flavors can cause cravings.

Hunger level, nostalgia, and emotional connections to these foods can increase the strength of your cravings.

SITUATION: Holidays, celebrations, and large events or festivals are often centered around decadent foods.

HABIT: Often related to environment and situation, habits can be formed by time of day, day of week, routine, or habits of others around you.

Examples: always having a snack while watching TV in the evening, Friday donuts in the office because they are always brought in weekly, or having Sunday pizza nights.

HUNGER: Going too long between meals can lead to low blood sugars (hypoglycemia) and hunger urges, making it more difficult to resist food cravings – especially if out shopping, being active, or at social gatherings.

Tips to Manage Craving Triggers

MOOD: The pleasure of eating only lasts while you eat it. Focus on how you will feel after eating it.

Ask Yourself: Will this food change your mood or situation after eating it, or will it make you feel disappointed, guilty, or unpleasantly full?

Try using the “5 D’s” listed below instead of responding to mood or emotion.

ENVIRONMENT & SENSES: Tempting foods within easy reach can be a problem, especially in times of stress. Stock your home, car, or office with snacks that you enjoy, are nourishing, and will help you avoid feeling bad. If the smell of a food is triggering your food craving, distance yourself from the smell. Light a candle, smell a strong odor (like peppermint oil), or spritz a quick spray of an air freshener to disconnect your brain from that craving.

SITUATION: Aim for more control of your situation.

If eating socially, try suggesting a restaurant that has a menu with healthier choices.

Look at menus or offerings ahead of time to avoid making snap decisions.

If going to a party or event that is not likely to have good food choices, try eating a small meal before going or bring something to eat if you are not sure what will be served.

HABIT: Actively listen to your appetite cues throughout the day.

Hunger is your body signaling a **NEED** for food while a craving is a psychological **WANT** for stimulation or relief of stress.

Be aware of hunger cues, like low energy or an empty-feeling and noisy stomach.

HUNGER: Adopt a meal pattern that is consistent, with no large gaps of time between eating, and a variety of food groups. A well-balanced meal or snack can contribute to avoiding blood sugar drops and intense food cravings.

Five D's to Disarm Food Cravings

DISTANCE: "Out of sight, out of mind" - if you do not have tempting items such as sweets and salty snacks readily available, you are less likely to give in to your craving.

DELAY: Set a rule that you will wait at least 10 minutes for a craving to pass before giving in.

DISTRACT: Try distracting yourself by focusing on another task you enjoy to occupy your mind. Take a walk or have a relaxing bath! Call a friend or family member, work on a puzzle, read a beloved book or genre, or do a little dancing to a favorite tune! Any of these work well while delaying.

DETERMINE: After delaying for 10-15 minutes, if the craving is still there, decide if it is worth indulging in.

Ask yourself: What will the nutrients in this food do for my body? Will this food assist or keep me from reaching my goals? Will I feel guilty after consuming the food?

DECIDE: If you choose to have the food, decide how much of the food to eat and stick to that portion. It is not the food that is the problem but how much is eaten. Avoid the "all or nothing" seesaw of indulging or rejecting the food completely. Realize there is room for all foods, it just may be smaller portions or only occasionally.



Dietary Changes to Decrease Cravings

EAT A CONSISTENT MEAL PATTERN:

Avoid skipping meals. Long periods of time without food drops blood sugars, intensifying hunger urges and making it harder to control food cravings.

INCREASE DIETARY FIBER:

Dietary fiber slows down digestion. This helps with feeling full when eating and satisfied for longer, which can reduce food cravings. High fiber foods include whole grains, beans and peas, nuts, and fruits and vegetables. Try a bowl of oatmeal or high fiber cereal for breakfast and snack on fruit and/or nuts between meals. For lunch or dinner, add beans to your salad or soup, aiming to make half of your meal vegetables.

ENSURE ADEQUATE SOURCES OF LEAN PROTEIN:

Like fiber, protein increases satiety and fullness. Focus on lean protein sources such as low-fat milk or yogurt, poultry without the skin, and fish or seafood. Plant-based protein sources include nuts or nut butter, soy products, and beans.

LIMIT HIDDEN SOURCES OF SUGAR IN THE DIET:

Research tells us that simple sugars and starches cause your brain to trigger the hunger system, which relates to your cravings. Acting on those cravings can cause overeating. Too much sugar at once can cause a rapid spike in blood sugar that results in a rapid drop, otherwise known as hypoglycemia. Sugary beverages (i.e., soda, juice, sweet tea) and sugary foods (i.e., cookies, candy, cake, donuts) are more obvious, but beware of foods that have hidden sources of sugar. Check food labels for added sugars. Try to buy foods or beverages that have little to no added sugars.

CHOOSE HEALTHY SOURCES OF DIETARY FAT:

Fat slows absorption of carbohydrates in the gut, which can help with fullness and keeps blood sugars from spiking. Choose healthy dietary fat sources including olive, canola, or sunflower oil. Foods with healthy fats are nuts and nut butter, seeds, avocados, tuna, salmon, or other seafood high in omega-3 fatty acids.