Crawlings are more powerful than hunger - and they can be as common as chocolate or as strange as sand. By Claire Buckis.

I t's third-noon and, like the theme's song, the chocolate in the on-off vending machine is calling your name. Try to ignore it and soon you can't think of anything else: a rich, velvety, mouth-watering chocolate. It's useless. You crack. You have to have it. Now.

Crawlings strike us with a lust for food that is far more demanding than the ordinary sensation of hunger. Whether we crave - licorice allsorts, mashed potato, a sticky doughnut, a greasy kebab - the desire is urgent and specific. "We don't necessarily crave our favourite foods," says senior psychology lecturer Eva Kempa, part of a Flinders University team researching the phenomenon of cravings. "What we crave depends on a range of things - hormonal changes, comfort foods or simply a craving we try to deny ourselves."

It tends to be the childhood treats or forbidden extravagances that we crave. Chef Naf Penny of Melbourne and Sydney's Rockpool restaurants says his happy childhood memories of triple to Chinatown with his dian mean he often finds himself craving Chinese noodles with soy and bean sprouts and barbecued pork. Chef Tony Bilgass of Sydney's Bilgass restaurant often reckles up at bed at two in the morning to try his homemade raspberries, fig and vanilla-bean jam on toast with whiskings of butter. "The green figs, raspberries, sugar and cinnamon is a combination that is both easy and delicious. It has that beautiful, velvety quality, with what a perfumer would call base notes of vanilla. Then it has the fresh, zesty flavour of raspberries laid on top of it: so deeply satisfying."

One popular theory of food cravings is that we long for what our bodies need - so we crave chocolate because we lack magnesium, or red wine because we lack iron. But in a US study by senior psychologist Professor Merca Pasnak, people who were given a vanilla-flavoured drink containing their complete daily requirement of nutrients still experienced food cravings. Eva Kempa says there's no evidence to support the nutritional theory of cravings: "When you take a closer look at chocolate there isn't that much magnesium in it." And, let's face it, you rarely hear the words: "I could really go for some steamed spinach right now."

According to researchers at the University of Washington's Centre for Public Health Nutrition, 58 per cent of men report experiencing cravings as do 97 per cent of women. They say men tend to crave hearty, fatty, protein-laden foods while women go for the sweet and high-carb options. Usually, food cravings can be wildly irrational. Fiona Light, 35, says she wanted to chew down on sand when she was pregnant in 2001, a craving sparked when she accidentally got some in her mouth at the beach. "Suddenly, the urge to eat sand was so strong," she says. "I started sneaking out to my son's sandpit to dip my finger in. Then the sandpit started getting a bit gross so I asked my husband to buy a bag of sand. It was the crunchiness on my teeth that I craved - it didn't have a flavour."

Light was experiencing a phenomenon known as pica, where people, including pregnant women and children, crave items with little or no nutritional value.

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such as dirt, clay, chalk and soap. Most expectant
mothers crave more conventional foods – or
experience aversions – based on hormonal changes
that can intensify a woman's sense of smell but no
one knows why some crave pickles and others sand.
Kemp's points out the objects of desire are
culturally defined. "I read one study that said people
in Egypt tend to crave vegetables cut with meat,"
she says. When chef Bill Granger was backpacking
around India at age 21, "all I wanted was a meat
curry." He says, "It was all I could think about." After
India he went to Japan and couldn't get a meat pie
there, either: "So I bought this thing that turned out
to be a curry doughtnut!"

Chocolate is a category all of its own. The
article "Mind-Effects Of Chocolate" co-written
by Gordon Parker and published in the Journal
Of Addictive Disorders, suggests that chocolate
yearnings may be linked to dopamine, the brain
pleasure chemicals released after sex, exercise
and eating chocolate.

Chocolate is the food Kemp's subjects most
frequently report craving for. "It has a specific place
in our (Western) culture," she says. "We often eat it
as a reward or give it as a present. But at the same
time we also associate chocolate with being 'bad'.
We see it as a naughty and nice food." Kemp's
herself once experienced a longing for Nutella so
strong she literally ran to the shops to buy some:
"I just had to have it. I didn't know why, but it was an
overwhelming feeling of need."

Other evidence suggests that the way we
crave food is similar to the way alcoholics pine
for a drink. A 2002 study led by Marco Pienaar,
published in brain-function journal Neuroimage,
found that when people think about foods they
crave, their brain activity is the same as
drug addicts contemplating a hit. But this doesn't
mean we are addicted to certain foods, just that
all cravings – whether for chips or a cigarette
might feel similar.

So what's the best way to manage unskin
food lust? Kemp's team has learned that people
experiencing a craving picture that food vividly,
so the best way to circumvent it is to diet of the
primary cognitive processes used to maintain such craving-
related images. For a temporary distraction, Kemp's
found that looking at an unturned TV screen can help.
"A screen of flickering black and white dots can
interrupt the mental image of the food and therefore
decrease the feeling of craving," she says.

If you have only occasional cravings, dietitian
Annalee Hornbridge believes the best thing to do is
indulge. "If you deny yourself you can end up
bingeing," she says. Sharma recommends eating a
small amount of your craving food, sitting down with
no distractions and savouring the taste, smell and
texture of the food.

"I often crave dark chocolate," says Bill Granger.
"You don't need much – just two squares. The
flavour fills your mouth, it has that bitter savouriness
without being too sweet. And it's so perfectly,
perfectly rich. It's almost ethereal."

Sunday Life