Sweet cravings gone in a flash

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Science Editor

Addicted to chocolate? Try staring briefly at a fuzzy television screen when the urge to munch on a chocolate bar hits.

Australian researchers have found that this technique can reduce cravings for confection.

A Flinders University psychologist, Eva Kemps, said food cravings were usually associated with mental images of a desired treat. This gave her the idea of trying the flickering screen approach.

Dr Kemps said it was known that the brain had a limited capacity to visualise objects and that watching black and white dots randomly appearing could interfere with this process.

"If you are looking at flickering patterns it ishogging certain amounts of that brain space. When you try to maintain an image at the same time you can't do it as vivid and clear a way."

Her team tested 48 people, half of whom said they regularly had chocolate cravings. The other half simply enjoyed eating chocolate.

Participants were asked to visualise chocolate treats then look at either a fuzzy screen or a blank one before rating the intensity of their craving.

Both groups experienced a reduction in cravings when looking at the fuzzy screen, with the effect strongest for the chocolateolics. The team’s results are published in the journal Eating Behaviours.

In the future, Dr Kemps said, people with serious cravings could carry around small computers that generated the visual "noise".