Tame food cravings

Are you trying your best to eat healthily, but find that you still crave your favourite foods? Dietitian Karen Inge shares the ways to keep those desires at bay.

Isn’t it amazing that one food can conjure up such intense desire in one person, while others can simply walk on by? Unlocking the secrets to these powerful controls on our urges to eat different types of food may help us to maintain a healthy weight. So what do we already understand about the causes of cravings? And what can you do to combat cravings and stick to your goals of healthy eating?

Causes of cravings

Most likely, there are a combination of factors that cause cravings, with marked differences observed in men and women. Men tend to crave fattier, salty food, such as chips and pizza, whereas women are more likely to have a sweet tooth. Research shows that many cravings for chocolate and other carbohydrate-rich foods, such as potato chips, can be intense in women in the days leading up to menstruation. Experts theorise that to counter the mood and mild depression related to PMS, some women may overeat carbohydrates in an attempt to balance low levels of neurotransmitters, such as serotonin, involved in the regulation of mood.

It has also been suggested that cravings are a result of nutrient deficiencies or a slump in blood sugar levels. It’s proposed that women may crave the magnesium in chocolate as a way of self-medicating against marginal deficiencies of this nutrient. Stress, anxiety, boredom, loneliness and “that time of the month” are just some of the emotional (and hormonal) states that can trigger comfort-eating and cravings. Often, we believe that if we eat a chocolate bar, we’ll feel better. This is sometimes true, but there are underlying psychological causes that need addressing.

Combat tactics

Research at the School of Psychology at Flinders University, South Australia, has investigated the cognitive mechanisms underlying food cravings, in particular, the role of mental imagery. Research shows that when people have a food craving, they have vivid images of the food they desire, with the intensity of the craving related to the vividness of the image. More importantly, the researchers have found that interferring with the cognitive processes used to form and maintain such craving-related images can dramatically reduce food cravings and bingeing. Try following some small strategies to curb cravings:

Out of sight, out of mind

Food cues include aromas, such as the wafting smell of freshly baked bread or catching a glimpse of a huge chocolate ice-cream on an advertisement on the side of a bus. Researchers at Flinders University have shown that exposure to food cues reliably elicits strong cravings, so at home, make sure that you place your sweet treats in a brown paper bag or opaque container in the pantry.

Small the roses

Recent studies by Flinders University published in the Journal of Applied Psychology show that it is possible to suppress cravings using visual (sight) and olfactory (smell) imagery tasks. For example, you may be able to override a chocolate craving by focusing on the image of a sweet-smelling rose.

Satisfy your hunger

Sometimes hunger is the last thing driving your craving, but it’s important to recognise true hunger. If you’ve skipped a meal and your blood sugar levels are dropping, try eating a piece of fresh fruit rather than chocolate or biscuits to satisfy your desire.

Simply switch

When a craving hits, try food choices that satisfy with fewer kilojoules. For example, if you crave something chocolatey to combat the afternoon slump, make a smart switch. Instead of that chocolate muffin, make a slice of toast, spread with two teaspoons of chocolate spread. You’ll save more than 700 kilojoules every time.

Healthiness indulgence

It’s probably not surprising to hear that one of the best approaches is to give yourself permission to have a regular, small amount of the food you crave. That way, your cravings are curbed and you’re less likely to binge. Buy individually wrapped, portion-controlled treats, such as a square or two of chocolate or a mini tub of ice-cream.

Karen Inge, AIP, is a leading Australian dietitian. If you have a question for Karen, write to Eat Right, The Australian Women's Weekly, GPO Box 4278, Sydney, NSW 2001. See the comments page for the occasion of AIP's Privacy Notice.

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